

TOILERS *of the* HILL



Wardis Fisher

Leaving the fertile valley behind them, Dock Hunter and his wife, Opal, pack their worldly possessions on a wagon and go to the hills of Idaho. There land is cheap and people few. There a vast loneliness broods upon the humpback mountains, and only the gray squirrels and the hawks dispute their possession. Pioneers of the twentieth century, they build a log cabin and Dock begins the conquest of the sagebrush and the matted grass that is to bring them fortune.

In the midst of desolation they struggle through the years. By brute strength Dock ploughs the stubborn earth, makes his land arable, and at last grows the golden wheat of his dreams.

"Toilers of the Hills" is a book that gives epic significance to a recent chapter of American history. For its richness of substance, its racy and vigorous style, and its magnificent conception of man in conflict with nature, this book will endure as an epic picture of the West.

Toilers of the Hills

BY
VARDIS FISHER



THE CAXTON PRINTERS, LTD.
CALDWELL IDAHO

1945

COPYRIGHT, 1928, BY VARDIS FISHER

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

**PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES AT
THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS
GARDEN CITY, N. Y.**

Photo-Lithoprint Reproduction
EDWARDS BROTHERS, INC.
Lithoprinters
ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN

**FOR
MY FATHER AND MOTHER
AMONG THE FIRST
OF ANTELOPE'S PIONEERS**

Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain
and hill shall be brought low. — *Luke*, III, v.

TOILERS OF THE HILLS

I

OUT of a blue wide valley, Dock Hunter, with his young wife sitting by him on a rickety seat, took his slow way up and over dusty foothills, following a gray wagon road, one track of which had once been an old cattle trail; going over round-backed hills and down into arid gullies and across the flat and lonely waste of desert and sagebrush. At his seat now and then he swore softly when it jumped off the wagon box, or he swore at his plodding team or at his freight which skewed and got away from its bindings and almost tumbled out. And between little whiles of thoughtfulness he would look at the dark, passionate face of his wife. 'It ain't as far as it seems,' he assured her and gave her arm an amorous pinch. 'See beyond them-there hills. That's about all of the far it is.'

Opal looked miles ahead at a huddle of gray hills, hot with the sunlight naked upon them, upon patches of white shimmering earth, and upon a great projection of black rock that lay upon the air three hundred feet above Snake River. Beyond all these the sky was thin and gray, as if in all the years of the world it had never known a cloud. Along the way among huge sagebrush with white trunks and dusty foliage, and among smaller brush covered with

white berries, were bunches of rye grass, tall bunches of wheat grass with settled showers of dust over their leaves, rabbit brush and torchweeds with golden flowers, and little carpets of redroot and spiked ragweed and knotgrass. Opal stared at all these signs of the desert and shuddered. She looked at Dock, and Dock leaned out and squirted a stream of tobacco juice upon the gold of a torchweed. A narrow line of juice had dried on his lower lip and in the corners of his mouth were little chunks of tobacco.

‘Dry farmun is a new thing,’ he told her; and with the accent but not the feeling of anger he cried at a horse: ‘Hey, you bastard there! Shake a leg.’ He had a funny little manner, Opal thought, of opening his eyes very wide when he spoke with enthusiasm but without utter conviction; and as he stared at her now his eyes grew as big as the eggs of a small hen. ‘Dry farmun is the newest thing in the world, they say. Nobody never knowed it would work till Ed Kyte plowed up abouten acre them-there hills and planted wheat. And that-air wheat growed while all men wondered. I guess that wheat would a-went forty bushels, not to lie about it. He says if he’d a-plowed the ground deepern six inches, he says it would a-went fifty or sixty. Do you know Ed Kyte? Six inches is all of the deep he plowed it. . . . Hey, you bastards! Shake them-there legs a yourn. . . . This land I got oughten raise fifty bushels, without my mind is not figgerun right. A hundred and fifty acres at fifty bushels, do you know how much

it would be? And wheat a-sellun at sixty cents, how much would that be, I wonder.'

'I don't see how you expect anything at all to grow in this country,' said Opal, and she looked at the gray hills, the gray sky.

'Why, God a-mighty, Ope!' he cried and looked around him. 'You see them-there bunches a dry grass? What do you think maken all them-there grow? Where them'll grow, wheat'll just jump up liken rabbits when a dog howls. With heads longern your hand. No water taxes, no ditches to make. We oughten get rich up here in two jumps from a dead lamb's tail.' He grinned and put an arm around her. 'Wheat'll jump up liken rabbits, Ope ——'

'Stop callun me Ope!'

'—— liken rabbits on them-there hills. Nothun but to plow and drill and watch it grow. Not another thing to say about. Does that sound good to you, or don't it?' He reached under her arm and pinched her breast.

'Stop your silliness!'

'You keep me silly, what with all that-air beauty you got. I could stop right here and go offen them brush ——'

'Oh, in God's world! Get along with you up over them hills.'

'Hey, you old bastards you, shake them-there legs a little faster afore I knock a colt outen you!'

Mile after mile they crawled over the old hills, sweat lathering between the horses' thighs, the

wheels turning up dust like clouds of gray smoke or the dust flowing like dirty flour over the fellies. Endlessly ahead were rolling hills or flat wastes of sagebrush, with here and there darker spots where mountain mahogany grew or serviceberry bushes, and in coves or on high hillsides were pale groves of aspens. To the east, before them, was a circling rim of mountain peaks, rising to altitudes of barren stone or falling down to broken backs along which pines grew against the sky. In the southeast the mountains were split asunder where Snake River came through, and beyond was a bluish vista of Swan Valley and of Grand Valley, still farther beyond. Everything around them was motionless and heavy with heat; not even a small wind was moving over these hills. And everywhere were silences, strangely apart and alone: the small green silences in coves along their way, the round silence of each hill or the flat silence of each plain, great solitudes that filled the sky and lay over the mountains and beyond. There seemed to be no sky, Opal thought; only thin dusty air no bluer above than below, only whitish altitudes as far up as the eye could see. At a far height she could see a bird, perhaps a hawk, a dark speck that appeared and vanished and seemed not to move; and ahead she saw gray squirrels running across the road, dragging their tails in the dust, and then sitting up as straight and motionless as stakes. When the wagon drew near, they dived swiftly into small round holes. Looking to left and right, Opal saw dozens of them, sitting up and chirp-

ing or running among the chaparral, sitting up again and chewing with tiny quick nibbles at invisible things which they held in their paws.

'Them-there damn squirrels,' said Dock, and spit over the doubletree. 'They eat a crop a wheat quickern you can say scat. I'll poison them squirrels with oats soaked in strychnine. You oughten see all their whirligigs when they decide to die. They bounce up and down and squeak and run around in circles.'

Among the brush were a few birds, a wren with a clear piccolo call, a sage thrasher hopping along the road, a tree swallow or a waxwing. In a grove of dwarfed aspens by the roadside Opal saw the yellow flash of a goldfinch. She moved a little nearer to Dock and placed a hand on his shoulder.

'Them-there damn squirrels,' he said. 'They squeak and run around liken hornets and then flop on their backs and die. See that-air hole. That's a badger hole.'

'I guess I've saw badger holes before now.'

'That-air's a badger hole and there's another. You never seen so many badgers in all your days as in this country here. That water you can see is Antelope Crick. It's somewheres about here the Indians scalped old Dad Ricks. I guess you never seen old Dad Ricks. His skull sticks right outen its skin and that's a sight for a man to look at.'

Antelope Creek, at this time of year, was a foul, lazy crawl of water that seeped out of the hills, far up against the mountains, and took its slow way

along a stinking bed to drop like a yellow, drizzling scum over a precipice into Snake River. At its source, Dock said, it was crystal and pure, but along its way sheep sneezed their mucus into it and dropped their dung into it, and not uncommonly they even lay down in it and died and rotted.

‘Old Dad’s skull is sure something for a man to look at, the bone stickun out as bright as a dead elk tooth and a row a black hair above his ears. The Indians took that-air hide off clean as a peeled potato.’

‘We’re not have to drink that stuff, I hope.’

‘Why, a poisoned coyote wouldn’t drink that-air stuff, Ope. I gotten to haul my water from the river. I gotten to haul it in barrels till I can buy a water tank and all. Lord, what I gotten to buy anyway! A drag and a drill and a binder and stuff for to build a house, doors and windows and stuff for to make a floor. And another team and a harness and some cows. And what I’ll buy it all with nobody knows.’

He turned and looked at her. ‘I spent all my money on you, Ope, that’s God a-mighty’s truth.’

‘Well, see what you got for all you spent,’ said Opal, and hugged his arm.

‘Don’t I see, all the day long? I never thought to get a woman liken you, Ope, not without I hunted the world over.’ He put an arm around her and pressed tobacco-stained lips upon hers. ‘Hey, you old bastards, shake them-there legs a yourn a little bit faster.’

The homestead which Dock Hunter chose from Antelope's fifty square miles of Idaho benchland was bare, except in one corner, of everything but sagebrush and dwarfed mountain mahogany and scraggy serviceberry bushes, dry weeds of many kinds and tall wheat grass and smaller grasses and ragweed. In one corner was a tiny cove, opening to the north, in which snow lay longer in the spring of the year. It had a few stunted aspens, some willows, and serviceberry bushes which always blossomed and never bore fruit. 'This-here's where our house will be,' he told Opal, and he climbed down from the wagon and shook off his coating of white dust. 'Them trees'll maken it a little cooler for you.'

While he unhitched and tethered his sweaty team, Opal sat and looked over her new home, but in her eyes there was none of her husband's glad eagerness. Here, as elsewhere in this Antelope country, everything that grew was hard and dry and looked brittle in the hot sunlight — everything on this choked desert of earth, over these hills with their resting clouds of dust. She saw no birds, nothing alive but squirrels, gray like the earth, and some hawks far above, circling around and around. In her dooryard, even where she imagined her front step might be, were tall sagebrush and scraggy bushes, full of dust and the forgotten nests of former years. The few aspen trees were short and gnarled and twisted, not straight and lovely like the ones she had known; and she could see black scars on their trunks, and she could see their naked roots in still writhing

shapes. Of all things around her on these hills, as far as the eye could see, the only tender green thing was a willow in the wettest part of the cove; and it seemed to be, when Opal looked at its trunk, an old thing strangely topped with youth.

And when she looked westward, along the way they had come, she saw only gray rolling slopes, gray round-backed hills, and a sky hung like a gray curtain at their far end. She looked at the tarpaulin, now white with dust, covering their belongings, at two curved plow handles, at something prodding up which she knew was the leg of a chair. She watched her husband, stripping off the wet harness, examining with gentle hands a patch of raw flesh on a horse's shoulder, stroking the dust from their manes. When he came toward her, smiling, brushing his clothes, Opal stared at his teeth. He had two very large teeth on top with a space between, and on either side, not close by, was a small sharp-pointed tooth. Never before had she observed his teeth with such acuteness. She imagined that his ears stuck out farther from his head to-day, that there was more bow in his legs; and when he came near, she saw a drop of water hanging from the point of his nose. 'Here,' she said, and wiped the drop away and kissed him lightly.

'You like this-here place a ourn, don't you?' he asked, and he turned around to see all of it. 'Let's go outen and look it over.'

And hand in hand they took their way among sagebrush, around buckbrush that clawed at their

legs, up to the highest point of all. 'Looken at all that, will you?' said Dock, and, circling her waist with one arm, he pointed with his other at all of the things he saw here, at the sagebrush growing as tall as a man's shoulder, at a little pasture of lush pine grass down low at one side. 'Where them-there stuff'll grow, why, wheat will just jump up liken rabbits, Ope. See that-air patch a grass far over there? That ground must a-been wettern all this-here rest. All that big of stuff must find water somewheres, without it wouldn't be a-growun like it is. We can have a garden over there, potatoes and a sight a green truck and mebbe even an orchard.'

And while Opal stared with eyes that ached from the heat and seeing so much that was only gray and lonely, Dock strove to make her see their home as it would be soon, as it would be in next year or in the next. There would be fields of grain, acres and acres of it, rolling slopes and hills of green in June, in July, and sheets of white and gold in August. Oats, he explained, would be white when ripe, wheat would be golden. He would get busy at once. He would build a house first, and perhaps he would get out the logs for a barn; and then he would set to and plow up at least a hundred acres for winter wheat. It would be hard work, breaking this stubborn sod, uprooting the big sagebrush, the buckbrush and the mahogany. But he would do it. His hands were itching for the handles of a plow; he wanted to feel again the reins around his waist, the pull upon them by horses eager

to go; he wanted to feel his feet sinking in plowed earth, to smell a field of broken sod. And Opal would not have much to do, not till he had built chicken coops and bought chickens, not till next spring when there would be a garden to tend, hens to set, chicks to be kept away from weasels and skunks and hawks; and so she could come out and sit on a furrow and follow him around the field now and then, or she could sit in the shade of a mahogany and read a book. And during the months when snow lay deep and winter wheat slept, he would get out posts for a fence, cedar posts, if he could find any, because, he explained, 'quakun asp posts ain't worth a tinker's damn nohow, without you set them every year. They rot plumb off in a year.' Too, he would get out logs for a chicken house, and possibly he would build an underground cellar in which they would keep their eggs and cream cool and fresh for a long time.

'My idea,' said Dock, 'is to keepen our eggs all summer long, when eggs ain't worth a little, and sell them in the fall. My mother always done it that way and she never had no rotten eggs to say about. They always candled her eggs and they was fresh as the day they was borned. And I guess we could keepen cream a long while, too. Stir it good every day, that's all of the trouble it would be.'

And as he talked eagerly of his plans, of all the things he would do, of the great sums of money he would make and of the fine home he would some day build, Opal felt warmly happy and very proud of

him. She pulled his head down and kissed him and patted his cheek.

'But I don't see,' she told him, 'how you can plow all them brush out with just a hand plow. It looks like they would just bust your plow to splinters.'

Dock dug into a rear pocket and fetched out a plug of tobacco. He picked some dirt off the place where he had last bitten and looked at the chaparral over the hills. 'No,' he said, and bit deep into his plug. 'I'll take them out, roots and all, liken they was only twigs. I'll sharpen my old plow and whack them-there off cleanern a whistle. They won't bother me worth a mention, Ope. I'll take them out liken they was never there and pile them up and burn them. That's all of the big them-there things is in my figgerun.'

With Dock's arm around her waist, her left hand in his, they went back down the slope to the wagon. On their slow way back he would stop and look about him, or he would kick his toe into the earth. 'It's dryern all hell on top, ain't it? But down under, them roots gets water somewheres. Them sage and hogany ain't a-burnun that a man can see.' And for a little while he looked over the gray hills, now flowing away through a deepening twilight.

While he gathered brush and built a fire, Opal unfastened the tarpaulin and set food and dishes upon the earth. Smoke writhed in thin gray curls or it crawled like slender tongues among the weeds, and Opal saw a small cloud of it hovering above a badger hole and slowly sinking. From his hands and knees

where he had been blowing at a lazy flame, Dock looked up at the sky. 'Looken at that-air smoke. The air's heavy as lead. I guess you know when smoke goes down the air's heavy. Wouldn't wonder a little that it rains liken thunder to-night.' Opal stood up and searched the sky for a cloud. 'It's heavy air makes that smoke go down,' Dock explained, watching her face. 'Looken at it go down that-air badger hole.'

'I can see a little white cloud away off by them mountains.'

'It'll rain to-night, Ope, without I miss my guess. I figger we mighten get soaked liken a couple a rats.' He knelt again and blew at the fire and Opal unwrapped a loaf of stale bread upon which dust had sifted. In the great silence of the night she could hear Dock's breath against the fire and she could hear the tiny dry crackling of a waking flame. 'This is a fine place we got, Ope. All them valley farmers will be up here afore long. Nobody won't give a tinker's whoop for a irrigated ranch afore long now.' Opal spread a newspaper upon the earth and sliced bread and bacon with Dock's pocket knife. The white cloud in the east was rising zenithward and a small wind came warmly over the hills, gathering the flame into slender orange spires tipped with darkness; and faintly, from far away, Opal could hear Snake River plunging along its narrow bed that lay under the night.

Suddenly Dock sat up and listened. 'That was a hooten owl I heared then. Did you hear it?'

'I don't think it was any hoot owl you heard.'

'Hell, woman, I know what I heard. You can't fool me on a hooten owl this day or another. When them things starts their racket you can count for rain. I never see it fail yet. Afore the night's over it'll rain liken all hell was loose.' He arose and looked about him. 'See the way them-there leaves hang on the quakun asps. It means rain when leaves hang still that way. If I could see the moon for a minute I could tell.'

'If you could see the moon,' said Opal, spreading yellow butter on slices of bread.

'If I could see the moon. The moon's got a circle round it like as not. When the moon gets a circle round it liken it was lost in a fog, looken for a good downpour.'

He walked down the vale, running north from the cove; to have a look at his horses. When he came back, Opal was frying bacon and rubbing her eyes in the smoke.

'The horses knows it'll rain,' said Dock, holding his hands to the blaze. 'They're all huddled and not eatun much. Where we got to sleep, I wonder. Under the wagon? I'll bet you rare up in the night and smash your face on the wagon reach.'

'I guess that ain't all I might do,' said Opal, fighting the smoke.

After they had eaten supper, Dock crawled under the wagon to make their bed. He cut away brush and dead roots, uncovered by wind and storm, and then he spread the tarpaulin and the dusty blankets.

On Opal's side he folded his coat for a pillow. For his own pillow he stripped off his trousers and tucked them under the blankets. He called to her to come and crawl in; and when, after a little, he heard no answer and no sound of her, he peered out. He called to her again, but there was no answer. Then he clambered out and stood up in his underclothes, looking for her, among bushes where deep shadows lay, over among the aspens in the cove and down the vale where wheat grass stood in ghostly bunches. He called again and again and searched the hills for her, cursing when his bare feet struck roots or hard ridges of earth and stopping in every little while to listen.

When he found her, she was looking westward over vales in which the night lay deep and over round hills that were like gray silences. 'Ope, what in God's world is the matter?'

She turned to him with a swift movement of terror and he saw tears in her dark eyes. He drew her to him and felt her shudder in his arms.

'Oh, I'm lonely in this place!' she cried, and her voice was tortured by sobs. 'Can't we get a ranch somewheres in the valley? Just any little old place, Dock, will do. Any old place will do and I won't complain. I can't stand these hills and them lonely mountains!'

'God a-mighty!' said Dock, and roughly shook her. 'You're bawlun for your mother, that's all. You women maken me sick to death, honest to God! You promise to love a man and stick to him through

hell and high water and then you go a-bawlun for your mothers. You ain't no sight of a wife for a farmer, not without you come to bed and stop your sniffun.' Taking her firmly by the arm he led her back to the wagon. 'A hell of a wife you are, Ope, and that's all of the truth there is to it. Makun me chase around in my underwear for a bawlun missus when I oughten be in bed. Afore God, Ope, I sometimes wonder why a man ever gets hisself a missus anyhow.'

They crawled under the wagon. Dock going first, Opal hesitating for a few moments and then following. They lay to sleep, tucking the covers around them, adjusting their cheeks to unfamiliar pillows. Dock stretched out upon his back and laid his arms across his chest. Opal stared at the wagon reach, barely a foot above her head, at the corner of a box jutting down between two poles out of a covering of old yellowish barley straw. She turned her head very slowly, softly, and looked at her husband. His eyes were closed, his mouth open, and there was still a rim of tobacco juice along his lower lip. In the nearest corner of his mouth was a brown spot, and there was dirt on his face, in his ear, and there was dirt in his hair. His arms rose, remained for a moment, and fell as he breathed. She thought of the great lonely world beyond the wagon, their home, out there in the night; the fields of sagebrush and torchweeds and the round-backed hills with their heads and tails in the earth. Straining her ears to the silence and holding her breath, she listened, but the

only sounds anywhere were the faint and far-away murmuring of the river and a dry whispering of a small wind among the weeds.

A great night loneliness was upon the world here, and across the way the skyline lay broken over black peaks and down into the depths of canyons full of shadows. She rose quietly on her elbow and looked up the cove where the leaves of aspens were trembling darkly against the sky, and down the vale where the horses were cropping grass as if this were the friendliest spot in the wide world. In a bunch of wheat grass were her dishes, piled unwashed, and near by stood a jug of water which Dock had brought to this desert of sagebrush and dust. The horses, he had said, were nearly choked, but to-morrow would be soon enough to water them. Perhaps they were eating now, or perhaps they were standing thirsty and forlorn at the end of their ropes. It was strange of Dock, with his reputation for fine care of horses, to leave them unwatered all night. But many things were strange now. She saw the gray ashes of their fire and a circle of sagebrush with their tops out and their charred ends lying inward. Most of the fire had hissed and died, she remembered, when Dock spilt a sheet of coffee over its flame. 'God a-mighty on that-air coffee pot!' he had cried, and he had stared long at his burnt fingers. 'What did you stick that-air pot right in the fire for?' And Opal felt now the desire to laugh that had tempted her then.

Dock was asleep now. He was beginning to snore, choking in his nose, as nearly as she could tell; hold-

ing his breath for a moment and then exploding the air from his mouth. He inhaled through his nose with little sharp snorts, nearly always in a series of three or four, and he sent the air out in a large breath of unspeakable disgust. The sound of his breathing flowed away in the night, becoming a part of the silence, flowing away into a wide thin end of darkness or becoming for a moment sharp and clear. It seemed to spread upon the air, as smoke did, and flow away, or it seemed to go in twists and spirals of sound, little lumps and knots of sound out into the great solitude. Opal imagined these knots wandering through the night, going like small thick knots of air somehow, coming to no ear, or finding an ear and exploding like tiny bombs. That, perhaps, was the way sound traveled: a word going as a small lump of air, a sentence as a series of small lumps, one trailing another, striking into ears and going again to other ears. She whispered Dock's name, and a thought of a little lump of sound speeding away made her smile. It would be an ugly knotty lump, the Dock sound, because Dock was an ugly knot of a name.

And then she sat up as far as she could, her head against the poles on the wagon, more restless now at the silence of all things but her husband, and drew a blanket to her breast and listened. The small night wind was faintly busy in the cove, making the aspen leaves tremble on the sky and riding gently over the bushes down the vale. She wished a great **wind might come and tear the trees from the earth;**

march in waves of thunder and power over these sleeping hills; open great holes in the sky and whirl mountain clouds of dust upward and through and over the cold stars. She wished it might come with rivers of rain and white lightning everywhere and that it might plow deep gullies over the length and breadth of her new home. Then Dock would go back to the valley and get a little place where things would be green and where silences would not lift their ghostly altitudes beyond the reach of human eyes; where there would be the noise of neighbors, even in the nighttime, and where there would be roads leading away on all sides and the smoke and light of distant towns. She moved a little out and thought for a moment she would go now down the long way they had come, down through the night until dawn overtook her. 'Only God knows what a woman gets into when she marries!' she murmured, and lay down. 'Only God knows!'

She brooded for a little while; and then she jabbed her elbow into Dock's ribs. 'Let me try and sleep, will you?'

Dock stirred and groaned and opened his eyes. 'Now what's a-matter, I wonder.'

'Let me sleep a little, will you? How you expect me to sleep when you snore like a log!'

'What's the time?' he asked, and strove to sit up. He looked for the moon, but there was no moon, only a few wan stars. 'All right. Get to sleepun then and I'll wait for you.'

Opal turned her back to him, pounded a lump out

of her pillow and adjusted her cheek; but she did not sleep, not for a long time. She stared at the mountains huddled in their black solitude and at a few low stars that strove to shine and went out. The night wind brought a smell of burnt sagebrush and of a dry earth filling with coolness and it brought dry paperish whisperings of its crawling among the grass. She drew her lower lip between her teeth and looked at her dirty dishes, motionless, with cold starlight upon them.

II

DURING the days that followed, Dock built a two-room house, not of straight and lovely bird's-eye pines, as he had once said he would, but of ugly cottonwoods gathered from bottoms along the river. The pines were on the mountains, a long way off, and they were too hard to get at. Cottonwoods would do very well for their first house, he said. Most of the valley people lived in cottonwood houses, built of logs 'a hell of a sight crookedern them-there I got.' Later, two years or three, they would have a frame house or one of bricks. 'Them-there logs, Ope, won't look so bad if I peel the bark offen them. Many a bride has lived in a house a sight more worseless than that-air one'll be.' And Opal strove to smile as she looked at the logs, scaled with black mud from the river bottoms and covered with huge knots or sometimes streaked with dark lightning scars. 'Them won't look half bad, Ope,' said Dock eagerly, and he jerked a strip of bark from one. 'Looken how white and nice it is under the bark.'

Opal sat on a grass mound and watched him, each day, as he laid the logs up in a rectangle, pausing now and then to wipe the trickling sweat from his eyes or to pull his wet shirt away from his arms and chest. Sometimes she would rise and move their bucket of water to a shaded spot as the hot sun crawled westward, or she would go over and examine

more closely the house he was building. When weary with work he would come and sit at her side for a little while, his head in her lap, a wet hairy arm over her legs. And when at rest or at work he would talk endlessly of what he would do, of the way he would conquer these gray hills and cover them over with fields of white and gold. He was eager, he told her, time and again, to get at the breaking, to uproot the mahogany and sagebrush as if they were pigweed and to stack them up and burn them in huge bonfires. He would take them out, buckbrush and all, as if they were only pigweed or foxtail, and of all his worries, this of plowing his land was least among them. Opal wondered why he spoke so often of the ease with which he would plow the brush out.

Or Dock would say, while he peeled and hewed the logs: 'Fifty bushels a acre we oughten get, I figger. Why, hell, Ope, Ed Kyte says there was forty bushels, a full forty bushels, he says, on that-air patch a hisen. And that wasn't no yield to say about, Ope. Mebbe there was fifty, he says, for all he knowed.' And Dock would pause a moment to stare at her, 'That-air wasn't no yield worth a mention, Ope. He just plowed his piece up and throwed the seed on. He just broadcast it, he didn't drill it, he says. Why, God a-mighty!' And after turning away to spit, he would bite into his plug and attack his work with fresh energy.

After the walls were laid, he covered the roof with aspen poles and threw earth upon them. He knew a man in the valley, he said, who planted a flower

garden on the dirt roof of his house. He planted sweet peas and wild rosebushes and God alone knew what else. Perhaps they should plant one here. It would be a lovely house then, with its clean barkless logs and a garden of flowers all over its top. If he did not plant flowers on the roof, it would grow up in weeds, pigweed and redroot and knotgrass. How the seeds ever got upon a roof, he could not imagine, nor could any other man. 'I guess the wind must a-blowed them up, didn't it? I never thought much about it afore now.' He once knew of a tree growing on a roof, an aspen he thought it was, or possibly a birch. After a while the tree had pushed its roots down through the ceiling and a spider had hung a web among them. What had the tree thought, he wondered, when its roots, reaching for a firm hold in the sod, had found only the emptiness below.

After working all day at the house, Dock would go in the evening time to the river for water. He would water his team there and then fill a tub and two buckets; and on his way back, up a long dugway and over rough hills, he would hold the buckets to keep them from spilling and Opal would drive. 'It's a hell of a note,' he would say, 'to choke my horses liken I do. They'll be poorern church mice in no time. I aim to build me a cistern and buy me a water tank right soon. My God, Ope, all of the stuff I gotten buy with a few dollars nohow!'

On a warm morning of late August, Dock sharpened his plowshare and set out to break sod. 'Now

watch me take them brush out liken they was only pigweed,' he said, and he grinned at Opal while he tied the reins together and adjusted them to his waist. 'Only a cottonwood could hang this-here team. Ope, you oughten see this team pull. It's the simple truth I tell you when I say them things will get outen there like as how they was only rabbit brush.'

'I've heard you say that a thousand times. I'll bet you just plow all them hills up in about a hour. . . . You'll mebbe get a plow handle in your old ribs so hard you'll bawl like a calf.'

'You don't talk liken a woman with a whole lot of sense,' said Dock, grasping his plow. 'Hain't up there! Eagle, Lord Duke!' He went over a hill, leaving Opal to wonder why he named his horses Eagle and Lord Duke, leaving her to watch a cloud of dust that gathered in his wake and spread a gray veil over the northern sky.

Two hours later he returned, coming to the house on long strides, his hands clenched, patches of red anger in his cheeks and large dark spots of sweat in his shirt.

'Well?' said Opal, who had been gathering ends of logs and chips and ribbons of bark from her doorway. 'You don't say you've plowed all them hills this quick!'

Dock did not answer at once, did not look at her. He found a stout piece of plank and began to shape it with an axe. And then, while he bored a hole in either end and in the middle of it, he explained that

he had broken his doubletree. 'That's the pullingest team in all of God's world,' he said. 'They cracked that-air doubletree in two liken it was only a broom-stick.' As he trimmed the ends of the plank and fitted a clevis, he spoke of things that troubled him, pausing from time to time to look at her. 'Why God made some things is what no honest man can find a good excuse for. Why He made them-there buck-brush with roots big as a saw-log. Why He made all them-there hell-fired squirrels to eaten a man's crop up. Why He made them-there badgers to dig holes biggern a well for a horse to fall in and break its damn neck. Why He put all them things in nature is something no honest man can say. God a-mighty!' And shouldering his new doubletree he strode off over the hill.

A little while later Opal went out where he was plowing. She found him on his hands and knees before the plow, his face livid with sweat and rage, trying to loosen a large tangle of brush and weeds that had wrapped round and round the beam. He was swearing terrible oaths, cursing the sagebrush and the dry earth and becoming silent for a few moments while he picked briars from his fingers. Then he stood up and with his damp shirt sleeve wiped stinging sweat from his eyes.

'Mother of Christ!' he said with hoarse despair and looked at his wife. 'Who in the jumped-up Jesus could plow such land as that-air land is! Who, I would like to hear any man say! Them sagebrush jerks the plow out liken it was only a toy.'

'I thought you was set to plow them up like they was pigweed. Like they was only rabbit brush, I heard you say.'

'For God sake, woman! Show a speck of sense once in all your lifetime. You oughten be a-holdun this plow for a little, gettun your ribs busted forty ways from Sunday. Then mebbe you'd show how empty that head a yourn is.' He tipped the plow over and kicked the sagebrush loose from its beam. Putting the reins again around his waist, he grasped the plow handles and shouted: 'Hain't up there, Lord Duke! Eagle, boy!' And he was off in a zigzag line down the hill.

The furrow that he turned up was a row of chunks of hard earth, flat pieces as large as plates, boulders of earth as big as the ends of logs sawed off the house. The bottom of the furrow was smooth and so hard that Opal could not dent it with the heel of her shoe. When the plowshare struck the roots of brush or of tall wheat grass, Dock was jerked to left and right as if he were a small boy. A wind came down the furrow, picked up a cloud of dust and took it in mounting spirals over the hills. Circling round and round overhead were a dozen hawks, looking for mice and squirrels, turning their cruel sharp heads this way and that, dropping down suddenly and then rising on huge slow wings. Now and again one of them called a shrill wild call that sent a cold shudder over Opal's flesh.

Down the hill a short way Dock had stopped, and when Opal went to him she found his plow firmly

locked in the tough roots of a small serviceberry bush. Dock was cursing again, hoarsely, half under his breath, growling horrible lewd oaths that made her sick to hear. He tugged at the plow, striving to loosen it, but it was as firm as if it had been spiked to the earth. He kicked it and looked at Opal with enraged bloodshot eyes; he looked back up the furrow that lay behind him like a row of dark boulders, at the gray hills shimmering with heat, at the trembling hazes of hot air. He walked around and looked at his horses, as wet now as if they had just emerged from a river, little spots of wet around their eyes, streaks of wet down their ears, over their faces. He pulled their collars back to let their shoulders cool and with his handkerchief he wiped trickles of water away from their eyes. Then he swept his forehead with an arm and cried: 'God a-mighty nohow!'

'You'd best unhook, Dock, and come to the house. You can't plow this ground. I told you that you couldn't plow this ground.'

Dock looked at her with scorn. 'My God, Ope, don't be just a plumb fool! You think my aim is to lay down against all these-here things? I'll tell you, I ain't a-layun down liken a dog yet, not for the love a Jesus. Not for the love a God, Ope, without my mind breaks. I'll conquer them brush or I'll bust my worseless neck.' He walked around his horses, rubbing their flanks, stroking their necks, talking to them, saying encouraging things to them, and now and again throwing a remark at Opal. 'Stiddy there, Eagle, old boy. Just taken it easy, Eagle, and

you, old Lord Duke. I ain't a man to give up afore a lot a sagebrush, not in a damn sight. Or hogany either, by the Lord God. Stiddy, Eagle, and we'll tear up them brush liken all get-out. I ain't to be conquered by nature in all the life-long world.' And, stepping back, he said: 'Looken Lord Duke, a-trem-lun liken he had the shiverun ager. Guess I'd best rest him for a little while.' He sat on the furrow by Opal and clasped his wet arms. 'See all them hawks. When hawks fly around that way, it means the ground is dry as a crust. That's what all them hawks up there means. I never see it fail yet.'

'Where's all the rain you said was to come?' asked Opal, looking up at the hawks. 'All that rain you said was to come weeks ago. I ain't seen it, not to speak of.'

'It'll come, don't fret yourself. I never see that-air calendar man fail afore right now. He says it was to a-been hot as hell and then, he says, downpours all over here. In all my life-long days that's the first time he ever missed it. Looken them chunks a ground, dry as gunpowder ——'

'But what about your hoot owl? And the horses all huddled that night, and the leaves ——'

'That must not a-been a hooten owl I heared that night. I guess that must a-been a mornun dove. Looken that-air sun. It's got a circle round it. That means rain, and I never see it fail yet. All them hawks means it'll rain liken tubs was turned bottom up in the sky.'

'I'll bet it never rains in this place. I'll bet it

never rained in this place in all the days of the world.'

'Sure it does, and it ain't no monkey business, neither. Well, Lord Duke, if you've quit that shiv-erun ager we'll take that-air brush out.' He rose and grasped the plow handles. 'Now watch the pullingest team you ever clapped eyes on. Hain't up there, Eagle, Lord Duke! Stiddy, boys!'

The horses settled down, squatting, the muscles bulging in their thighs and shoulders. They pulled evenly, with all their power, but the plow did not budge. Dock began to swear again, to pronounce curses on the earth and on things under and above the earth; he cursed the day he was born, and his mother, and every force of nature that set itself against his will. His voice was so hoarse with rage and hate that Opal trembled and turned away. For a little while he was silent of speech as he wrenched at the plow handles, as he strained at the beam until his face was scarlet and large veins stood out on his forehead. Then he swore again, terrible blasphemy pouring from his mouth in volcanic fury, great oaths choking in his throat. By small degrees he loosened the plow and pulled it back from the brush. He glared down at it, trembling with rage and spent strength, and Opal stepped over and touched his arm.

'Don't try no more to-day, Dock. Come to the house now. You can't plow these hills ——'

But he threw her hand off and looked around him with red eyes, streaked with tiny broken veins. 'For God sake, Ope! You think I aim to let nature con-

quer me this way? I'll make these-here hills raise wheat liken they raise sagebrush or I'll die right in my tracks! You ain't no sight of wife for a farmer, wantun to give up at each little thing. God a-mighty, Ope, leave go!' He put the reins around his waist and took the handles. 'Go on to the house, will you, and let a man do his work.'

When he came in at noon his shirt was drenched with sweat and his face was mottled with red spots. His lips were white. In silence he ate his dinner of dry bread and coffee, of water gravy and a little jam. His eyes explored the table as he hungrily fed his mouth, gulping his food down after a moment of chewing, washing it down with black coffee. And then he went outside and lay upon his back in the shade of the house. Opal thought he was perhaps yielding, perhaps preparing to return to the valley, and she went out and sat beside him. But he was not thinking of going back, he said, in reply to a gentle question. He would never go back, never until he had made wheat grow on these hills as tall as sagebrush. He was only thinking of new ways of doing things. On the twenty-third of September a rain would come to these hills. It always did, he had been told. On that day the sun crossed the equator or it did something like that and rain swept the world. He could not say why, but it was true. Nature was strange in her ways and a man had to learn her ways before making her yield to his hands. And in the meanwhile, until rain came, he would grub out the larger mahogany and buckbrush, or

perhaps he would set fire to these hills and burn up everything but the earth. That would be a way to do things, a swift sure way; but a fire would not burn the roots and it would burn the aspens and perhaps the timber down by the river. He would go to the valley and get a grubbing hoe and lumber for a floor and windows and other things which they needed. Reaching over, he laid a hand on Opal to feel the stir of a small life within. 'It'd best be a boy,' he said. 'There ain't no place for girls here yet. I want two boys first to helpen with all this-here work and then you can have you a girl or two. If it ain't a boy, Ope, you'd best sneak off somewheres afore I shake the daylights outen it.'

Early the next morning Dock went to the valley and Opal was left alone. 'Don't you be afeared,' he said, and kissed her trembling lips. 'I'll be back in three jerksof a dead lamb's tail.' And when she moved swiftly into his arms he gave her a fierce hug and laid his cheek for a long time against her hair. He mounted his wagon and when he called to his horses there was a hoarse uncertainty in his voice. Far down a gray hill he waved his hat and disappeared.

While washing dishes Opal tried to sing, but all the words of old songs were strange in her ears. She rattled pans to shatter the awful loneliness everywhere pressing in, down from a remote pale sky, up from the hot earth, from the mountains across the way. She went to her door, hoping for a friendly sound, but there was only the hungry cry of hawks, now

circling endlessly, or the small patter of a squirrel's feet near by. Down the vale some chokeberry bushes were turning red and the wild geraniums were as red as blood, and over on the mountains, scarlet was upon the maples. Up in the sky she saw two small birds chasing a hawk, darting at it swiftly, going over and under its large wings.

She turned back to her work. In the center of the earth floor was a tall sagebrush which Dock had left and upon which she had hung dishrags and drying cloths. He would leave it there for a joke, he had said; without sunlight it would not know what to do. 'It'll think it is night all the time,' he had said, and he had laughed loudly at his jest. Opal thought she might make diapers of flour sacks that she had saved or she might hem some tiny waists; but instead she took a knife and dug at the roots of the sagebrush. After a little, she looked through the doorway and murmured: 'God alone knows what a woman gets into when she marries!'

She rose and took from a box a small mirror. She had been known among her friends as the loveliest of all old Jim Britten's lovely daughters. She had the blackest hair and eyes, the evenest and whitest teeth, and she had, one had told, the loveliest complexion that eyes had ever looked upon. But she was smaller than her sisters, almost too small, even tiny, some had said, but with a body as beautiful as any.

She could have married many men, she was now remembering, all of them handsomer than Dock, all of them younger by several years. 'That dashen

widerer,' her father had called him. And as she stared in her mirror now, she thought that was it. He was dashing and he wore an air of experience that had lured her to this white waste of loneliness. And other girls had loved him, too, in spite of his thirty-four years and his dead wife. Opal had seen two of these, Kate Blodgett and Mary Dinsdall, throw their arms around his neck at a dance and kiss him. While remembering these things, and many others, she stared at the yellow growing on her lovely teeth, at her unwashed hair full of dust, at tiny flakes of dry skin on her lips. Three weeks she had gone now without a bath. When she once spoke of the matter to Dock, he said: 'We ain't a thing to bath in, Ope. And we can't spare the water nohow. Bathun is no account, not a little. I sweat the dirt offen myself. People with any ambition sweats the dirt offen themselves.'

At noon she drank some coffee and went outside. Upon a hill she sat under the scanty shade of a mahogany and looked westward to a pale blue valley where Dock was buying things. The air around her was trembling with heat, and miles away, in a small valley between two hills, she was certain of a shimmering lake of water; but when she climbed the hill to have a clearer look, the sheet of water vanished and where it had been was a valley of gray. Far off to the south was a cloud of dust rolling along the way to Swan Valley, and in a few moments she saw an automobile climb a hill and go down out of sight. Except for the dust and the hawks she saw nothing

moving, and she heard no sound upon these hills. Everywhere was solitude, pitiless and terrible, reaching up farther than the human eye could see.

Feeling something crawling on her leg, she pulled her stocking down and found a sheep tick, a tiny thing that was nothing but legs and a brown flat body as thin as paper. She took a pin from her dress and impaled the tick on a twig. The chaparral, she knew, was alive with these ticks. Every night Dock had picked many off his body, had torn them loose, their mouths full of flesh and their legs kicking. He picked dozens of them from his horses, some of them large and whitish and with grotesquely short legs. Always in their mouths was a piece of skin torn from the horse. When she looked, an hour later, at the one she had impaled, it was still wriggling.

Toward evening the air cooled, and a cool, lazy wind came up over the hills. She went back to the house and leaned in the doorway, looking up at the sky now empty of hawks; or she searched the bare rooms for little things to do. Above the eastern rim was a small cloud, the same cloud, she imagined, that had been wandering forlornly round the horizon for many days, never climbing very high and always dropping under the mountains at night. It was a fleecy white thing, surely with no rain in it; and she wondered why it rose each morning to hover motionless or to move lazily above the mountains. Perhaps behind the mountains was a large army of black clouds, full of rain, brooding there and waiting. After the sun had sunk through a purple evening,

she went again upon the hills and watched night rise from the earth. From the ground darkness awakened, growing blacker and flowing away in shadows, filling all the vales with night until she could see only the round backs of hills, growing darker and darker. Above the skyline of the mountains there seemed to be no night, only the gray altitudes of daytime; but below the skyline was a great basin of darkness, hills like dark billows and vales brimming full of deep shadows and little groves of trees crowded with things of the night.

Dock was coming home now, was perhaps as far as Poplar, or he was upon the long dugway that followed the precipice high above the river. He would be chewing tobacco, or he would be gathering bitter leaves from bushes along the way and eating them to cure his stomach trouble. If he'd stop chewing tobacco, she had told him, he would not have to eat all the bitter things of the world. And he had replied that eating these things, yarrow and aspen leaves and the bark of chokeberry bushes, had saved his life times without number, and that chewing tobacco hurt no man. It would hurt him less, she was thinking now, if he would not swallow the juice, as he did when sitting in a house with nothing to spit on but the floor. There was little wonder that he had sharp pains in his stomach, around his heart.

The cloud to-night had not gone under the mountains, but was coming up the sky, slowly as if riding on a wind, and other clouds like white castles were coming after. Their lower edge folded under and

their tops like great balls of cotton rolled over and down. Soon now, slanting rain would come in wide sheets over these hills, driving their long lines down at the earth, and black thunder would shake the mountains and lightning would leap out in white veins. Or perhaps the clouds would pass over and go to the valley where things were still green. Alfalfa was still green there, and miles and miles of sweet clover along ditch banks, and frost had not yet settled upon the maples. And birds were still there whose names she knew, and whose ways a little, and whose songs: the ouzel bobbing up and down to its fullest height as if to study its reflection in the water, tuning its song to the ripple of streams, loud in springtime when streams were full, low in late summer when they fell away to murmurings; the golden yellow warbler with its funny little song of three syllables and its odd ways of trying to draw people away from its nest and with its busy warfare against cats and sparrows and cowbirds; the barn swallow, most graceful of all birds, dipping and soaring and going swiftly for gnats, twittering from the high gables of buildings or dancing among the limbs of trees; and the quaint little tree sparrow that came south in flocks in midwinter and ate all the weed seeds above the snow.

The clouds were quite to the zenith now, hanging low, pushing a white breast westward. The ones that had risen last had black bellies as if they were full of thunder and rain. Up here there were only a few birds. She had seen a robin with ragged feathers,

a few sparrows of the color of these hills, and once she had seen a gorgeous flicker devouring a mound of ants. In deep twilights she had seen nighthawks darting like swift shadows after insects, and she had seen innumerable bats.

Dock would be home soon now. He would come up over the hill yonder, the white star in Eagle's forehead showing first, then Dock sitting high on his seat with stuff piled behind and around him. He would have many things to say, talk for which she hungered, of people he had seen and places where he had been. They would sit by a blazing fire, because the night was growing cooler, and while he drank his coffee he would talk of all these things and she would listen with starved ears. Perhaps he would bring her candy, as he used to do, or a lovely dress, though she had little need of lovely dresses here. She had need of nothing here but the things she would never have, people talking around her and places to go and new ways. For these, for all that she loved, she would have the silence of a lonely house and ugly things around her and a cold sky over a pitiless earth. And when she stood up to go back to the house, she felt loneliness rise to meet her and she saw black hills rolling away in the night.

Long before she could see it, Opal heard the wagon, far down in the night, shattering the silence; she lost it when it went under the hills and found it again when it climbed over their backs or followed a ridge. And when it came up over the last hill, a

black, shapeless thing moving slowly toward her, she went out to meet it and Dock stopped and took her up on the seat beside him. He put an arm around her and talked and she looked back at the things he had bought. Behind, he was leading another team, She could see something red that was a harrow, maybe, or a plow, and she could see something large and round that glittered. Somewhere among all these, she could tell, was a cage that held a moving live thing.

‘That-air’s a hen,’ said Dock to her question. ‘A hen and her chicks is what that is. And down under all that-air stuff is a pup, without he’s dead, and I guess he ain’t, because back there a short ways he let off a awful yelp.’ Of all these things he was as proud as a small boy, unloading them one by one, after turning his horses free, and eagerly explaining to her what each was. This was his grubbing hoe, he said; and so eager was he to try it that he went into the house and grubbed out the sagebrush. ‘That-air is my disc-gang plow, and looken at it!’ Those large discs, he assured her, would cut the brush out as if they were only pigweed. That was his water tank, all made out of galvanized iron, and that was a set of brand-new harness. ‘Say, this-here pup ain’t dead a-tall,’ and he handed to Opal a frightened little fellow that dug his nose into her palms.

When everything was unloaded they went into the house, taking the pup and the hen and her brood with them. And while Opal made crumbs for the chickens and let the pup lick water gravy from her

hand, Dock built a fire and talked of the people he had seen. Some of these people, as he had said they would, were coming to Antelope to settle homesteads. Ole Humbersum had sold his forty acres of gravel bed and dwarfed cedars on Butler's Island and was already here, somewhere over by the river. Hansie Hansen was only two miles down the way and was preparing to break ground. Close by him, on the east, was Lem Higley, and down on Antelope flat Jad Thurginstowen was building a house.

'It's just liken I told you,' said Dock, turning from his coffee to look at her with pale, triumphant eyes. 'All the damn families in the valley will be up here afore a man can count his fingers. It tooken me to start it and now they'll all come hellety belt up here. We never got here a minute too soon, not a minute to say about.' Opal was sitting on the earth floor, feeding crumbs to the chickens, letting them pick food from her open palms and turning now and then to pat the frightened pup that still kept his tail between his legs. 'It's just liken I said,' repeated Dock, some of his spit missing the open stove and sizzling on the hot lid. And he continued to talk of these newcomers, not of the valley people whom Opal knew and liked, but of the uncultivable land in Lem's homestead, of Jad's intention to drink the foul stuff of Antelope Creek, and of Ole's going down on the river benchland where there was a heavy growth of serviceberry bushes and buckbrush. A silence fell; and then Opal heard: 'Say, did you ever see Ella Hansen, Hansie's woman?

She's something for a man to look at. How do you reckon a guy ugly as Hansie ever got such a missus? That's a problem to perplex a man's mind. I been thinkun about that for hours and I can't seem to figger any sense in it. . . .'

Through the window Opal saw the night growing blacker, because the sky was dark now with low-hung clouds. She took groceries from a box and put the chickens into it with their mother and set them near the stove. Around the pup's neck she fastened a small rope and tied him to a chair, because she thought he might wander into the night and be killed by a badger, or he might slink down a badger hole and never come out. The chickens were making happy little cheeps, and the hen, peering over the box to watch Opal, was trying to shelter them with her wings. The pup wagged his hind quarters and dragged his tail, or he came over to her and rubbed his gravy-covered nose against her leg.

'I can't figger that-air thing out worth a thought. She might a-got a first-rate man, I think. Hansie ain't no proper man for a lovely woman. . . . Say, Ope, we'll be rich as creation afore you know it. Three hundred dollars a acre we'll get for this land, any day we want to ask for it now. Two hundred they get in the valley for them gravel beds, water taxes and all. A hundred and sixty acres at three hundred dollars, how much mighten that be, do you know?'

The next morning Dock arose before dawn and

set off without his breakfast to fetch a tank of water from the river. When he returned, two hours later, breakfast was not ready. He walked about the kitchen, pausing from time to time to frown at Opal, stooping to have a look at the chickens or going to a window to stare at his plow or harrow. He took the grubbing hoe in his hands and examined its blade, stroked his hands over its smooth handle, and at last went outside to grub a bush. When he entered the house again he said: 'Listen, missus: when did you get up, anyhow? We won't never get rich if you lay abed all the days of your life. Never in God's world, we won't.' Opal gave no answer. She kept her back toward him and was busy at the stove. Her eyes grew darker, her lips thinner, as she prodded the fire and removed small strips of bacon to a tin plate. Dock was examining his grubbing hoe again; was now staring at the cold steel of its blade, was now looking at her. 'I ask you, did you hear what I said to you just a minute back? I was a-speakun to you, did you know it?'

Opal quickly set a tin plate on the table. The morning air was chill and wet, though she thought no rain had fallen during the night. From east to west over the sky was a blanket of dark clouds, hanging so low that mountain-tops were eclipsed, so near the hills that Opal imagined they might come down and rest there. She emptied fried potatoes and two small strips of bacon upon the plate and poured black coffee into a large tin cup. Dock sat up and began to eat, still watching her with angry,

perplexed eyes. Instead of eating with him, Opal tipped the box over to let the chickens out and again fed them crumbs from her hand. When the pup came over, she caressed his back while feeding the chickens. His tail no longer slunk between his legs, and after a little while of rubbing he barked at the clucking hen who was walking imperially about with stiff feathers standing out of her neck. The pup lay upon his belly and gave her sidewise looks, turning his head this way and that or changing his bark to a low whine.

‘Why don’t you say a word when I speak to you?’ demanded Dock. ‘No man wants to be a-talkun to his woman when she don’t never say a word. God a-mighty!’

Opal rose and filled his cup. From the stove where she kept them warm she gave him more potatoes and the remainder of the bacon and from the oven she gave him two biscuits. Then she went outside.

She was standing behind a bush when Dock shouldered his grubbing hoe and started toward the hills. A little way out she saw him stop and seem to deliberate and she stepped more invisibly around the bush. While he searched here and there with his eyes, he took out his tobacco and bit into it. Then he went a little way farther and stopped again and looked. He stuck his grubbing hoe into the earth and came back.

‘Ope!’ he called, and began to search among the bushes. ‘Opal! God a-mighty, where are you? Opal, answer me, I tell you!’ When he found her at last,

she was standing tense and unyielding, watching him with unforgiving eyes. 'What's a-gettun into you, Ope? A-runun off liken a uncivilized woman!' He took her in his arms and for a brief while she remained rigid, her head turned stubbornly away; but suddenly her hands went around his neck and she drew his mouth down to hers. 'Come with me,' he said, 'and watch me take them-there brush out the dirt liken the speed a hell.' And she went with him, her arm around his waist.

She was a little amused, on the way out, by his boyish eagerness, by his endless talk of things he would do, dreams he would make, and most of all by his vindictive fierceness toward the brush of his farm. He chose the largest bush, a spreading serviceberry on a hillside, and drove the blade of his hoe into its roots. He would take this one out first, he said, pausing to wipe his forehead, and then all the other bushes would give up and march away. This one was the king, was it not, and he had always hated kings. 'I've hated kings ever since that-air George somebody dumped all our tea out and was licked by Washington at some hill. Did you ever study much history when you was learnun in school? I hate them-there damn English. I hope none of them damn English don't come up here.'

After grubbing out a root, he would seize its bush and savagely throw it from him. He would push the tops of a bush down and stand on them while grubbing, fiercely trampling them underfoot, kicking at them when they were uprooted. And he swore at

them while he worked, not with anger, unless he found an uncommonly tough one, but in the same calm voice with which he talked. 'Lord all gods, come out of there. . . . God a-mighty, what's to get into you nohow. . . . The holy hellety beltun angels, looken that-air root, Ope, biggern the side of a barn. . . . I'd like to know why Ella Hansen married that ninkempoop, Hansie. . . . Here, for the love a God! Stand on that-air top, Ope, will you?' And when, after an hour of relentless work, the bush was cleared out, he piled it up and tried to burn it.

The clouds were breaking away now, dividing at the zenith and drawing to the horizon on all sides. Halfway up the sky the sun was scattering them and coming through, filling the near one with golden sunshine and pools of light.

A little later, Lem Higley came up over a gray hill. He spoke to Dock and then stared at Opal with small round eyes, far back in his head. She did not like his eyes or the way he stared at her, and she was quite sure she would never like him, so small was he and so dirty and ugly. He wore waist overalls and a belt studded with nickel ornaments, and around his greasy sombrero hat he wore another belt that glittered. When he grinned at her, for no reason whatever, he showed yellow teeth, two of which thrust out against his upper lip. 'He has tusks,' Opal thought, and looked up to see if the sun had come through.

Dock was working more fiercely now, kicking at a mahogany, burying his hoe with a hollow thud into

its roots, and mixing new oaths with his old ones. From time to time he would glance up, with casual certainty, as if to learn what Lem thought of his strength and profanity.

'Judas priest,' said Lem, moving nearer to Opal. 'There ain't only one guy in this world can cuss worsen he can. That's Jad. Jad Thurgenstowen, I mean. By God, but Jad can cuss a blue streak around things.' Dock was stooping low, tugging at a root, and cursing everything under the sun. 'I can swear, by God, yes, when I want to. But when I swear I have to be mad as a fiddle string. Then I can cuss, by God, well as any man out.'

Dock stood up, distorting his face as if with terrible pain as he straightened his back. 'That's a man's job,' he said, with quiet tolerance of Lem's size, giving Lem a look that completely eclipsed him. He came over and drew Opal apart. 'Think it's about time to get us some dinner? That-air guy, too. He's come for his dinner, that's all he's come for. I've knowed him plenty long, and that's what's on his mind.'

Dock turned again to his work and Opal went back among the sagebrush to her house. The clouds were sinking to the mountains and were whitish now, as if the sun had drunk their rain, and the zenith was remote and gray. She fried potatoes and some thin strips of bacon and set a pot of coffee to boil. Of the few groceries which Dock had fetched, she opened a jar of imitation strawberry jam and put a plate over it to keep the flies out.

At the door, a little later, she heard Lem protesting loudly. 'I tell you no, Dock. I eat a late breakfast. I ain't feelun to eat a thing now, Dock, not a thing in the world. . . .'

'Sure you can. Come on in. That bachelor grub a yourn will kill you dead as a doornail, without you have a decent fill-up once in a while. Come in, you can eat all right.'

Lem entered, pulling his hat off, saying: 'But I can't eat, I say. I'm full as a tick. Judas priest, I eat a breakfast to kill a ox, I did.' He glanced furtively at the table and then looked for a place to put his hat. He stooped to rub the pup's nose and looked again at the table when he straightened.

'Get yourself washed,' said Dock, 'and set up.'

'But I can't eat a thing, Dock. Honest to God, I am plumb full yet. I don't feel to eat a single thing.' But he washed his hands, red knotty hands, and from time to time he looked swiftly at the table, over at the stove, at Opal.

'That land,' said Dock, passing the potatoes to Lem, 'that-air land is worth its weight in gold, once a man's got them brush out. God ain't made no better land in the whole creation.'

'I say He ain't, Dock,' agreed Lem, heaping potatoes upon his plate and glancing guiltily at Opal. 'By God, no.' He seemed to measure the pile on his plate, those remaining in the dish, and then he added a few more. 'That's what I said to Hansie Hansen, Dock. You know Hansie?' he asked of Opal, hardly meeting her eyes. 'He's down there by me, a tall

limber guy whose belly aches fit to kill. I says that land, Hansie, that land can't be beat for wheat ——'

'Turkey red wheat I aim to plant. There ain't no wheat will stand the drouth liken turkey red ——'

'Exactly what I says to him, Dock. Turkey red wheat for this land, I says, for it's a drouth-killer ——'

'Forty bushels, mebbe fifty, is what Ed Kyte got offen that piece a hisen. I figger fifty easy as rollun off a log. Fifty bushels ain't no stand ——'

'Turkey red, I says, for this-here land. Why, Judas priest, I told him, down in the valley they raise fifty bushels, I says to him, and I've saw the time when fifty wasn't in it. Why, ain't you noticed the richness this-here ground, Dock? It's black——'

'I tell you, Lem, God never made no better land anywheres than what is right here in Antelope.'

'He never will, Dock. He done His old best when this job was laid out. By God, Dock, I think He did.'

'Looken them States back east somewheres. Looken Ioway. Why, it ain't got no ground compared with this.' Dock stopped eating for a few moments and stared at Lem with wide, eager eyes. 'Pass Lem something to eat, Ope. I'll bet a nigger baby it ain't. Ope, is this all you cooked? Where's all them groceries I bought? There's a whole raft a stuff in that-air box.'

Opal, who had been sitting a little apart, looked at him with mild astonishment. He winked at her, but she could not guess what he meant by winking. Tartly, she said: 'Yes, where is all them groceries

you fetched home? I ain't seen them to speak of.'

'I brung a whole load,' Dock explained to Lem. 'I guess she didn't have time to cook any. A little more coffee, missus.'

'Stop your damn callun me missus! You can get your own coffee.'

Lem looked at Opal's dark face and then at Dock, who rose to pour coffee. 'Well, you are my missus, ain't you? Call me your mister, if you liken it better that way.'

'She sure don't like to be called missus,' said Lem, looking at the fire of her eyes. 'That's clear as a mountain to my seeun.'

When Lem had gone, Dock said: 'After this, Ope, when I say, "Why the hell didn't you cook something?" you don't want to say there wasn't anything to cook. That's a hell of a thing to say around company. You want people thinkun we're poor as church mice, I guess. You don't want to say that never again, Ope. You want to make a excuse or something. God a-mighty, that's why I winked at you.'

September turned cold, especially the nights of it, and winds came from secret places, down the canyons or up from the valley, and scattered weed seed over the hills. Seeds of cottonwood and willow and brome grass clung to horses and clothing, or the former floated in the air like shreds of cotton; tumbleweeds and amaranths and thistles were broken

off at their roots and swept or rolled over the benchland, scattering their seeds as they went; and seeds of cockleburs matted the manes and tails of horses or they were gathered by tumbleweeds and carried with them. On some days a northern wind was faintly white with the cotton of river-woods. The winds would soon blow up a rain, said Dock, or his grandmother had Saint Vidas dance. But the autumnal equinox passed and no rain came.

On the twenty-third Dock looked by turns at his calendar and at the sky. 'It says rain, Ope, without I can't read what I'm lookun at. It says storm and danger over the whole northwest. Electrical storms, it says, and ain't that rain or not? Twenty-second, it says, high winds and heat, and it says on the twenty-third heavy thunderstorms in Utah and Idaho. Ain't to-day the twenty-third? . . . Well, in all my life-long, it's the first time that-air calendar man ever lied, and I've followed him for years. Mebbe the rain's a day late or something, do you think? Looken out west there, Ope. Don't it looken rainy as hell out there right now? . . . I think that mighten be a rain a-comun, afore God I do.'

But the rain did not come, nothing but swifter and higher winds that gathered the dry earth in clouds of dust and filled the eastern sky with a curtain of gray. The squirrels had holed-up long ago; the birds had flown south, except a few sparrows and mourning doves, and there was now no life moving on these hills. Above them a few hawks still soared, higher now and nearer the mountains; and flying

down or up the river, Opal saw once in a long while a thin dark line of wild ducks or geese. Dock grubbed the brush, choosing more and more the larger bushes, and realizing more deeply, as each day drew to its close, how hopeless was his plan to clear the farm before snow came. Each evening he was very tired and more depressed; but he hid his depression in a constant flow of talk, talk of what he would do, of his dreams. He would make these hills grow wheat as tall as a horse, he said again and again; he would turn them into rolling fields of green, of gold. Next year and the next, and for many years, he would have a hundred and fifty acres of wheat. Six thousand, or perhaps eight thousand, bushels of grain, and nobody need be surprised if there were twice that much.

Clearing brush away, breaking the sod, making the earth mellow and yielding — these were tasks that any pioneer had to face, no matter where. It had been this way, he supposed, the world over; countless stubborn things, brush and weeds and animals, had been rooted up or burned, poisoned or shot, before the earth came to be an earth of lovely fields. He could remember when the valley had been only a huge brush patch, miles and miles of sagebrush and dwarfed cedars in gravel beds; and to-day it was a wide green loveliness of alfalfa and clover, of potatoes and peas and grain. And after talking of these things for an hour, he would rise and look at his new home or he would go out again and grub until dark. Then he would come slowly to the

house, broken by his day's work, and sit in silence for a long while, brooding and dreaming and looking through the doorway at the darkening hills. And always at bedtime he would go out to see his horses, to remove ticks from their bodies, to stroke their necks and talk to them. He loved his horses, Opal once told him, better than he loved his wife. And Dock said: 'I do love my horses, Ope, for a fact. My horses is as good as me, I figger. I ain't no time for men what knocks their horses this way and that. But I love my wife, too,' he said, and he took her in his arms and kissed her.

III

IN October Opal's child was born. When Dock learned it was a boy he said, 'God a-mighty,' and took the red and blinking babe in his arms. 'It's a bumpshus kid,' he said, staring at it, trying to estimate its weight. 'What a heft this-here kid's got, Ope. It mighten weigh ten or twelve pounds, I think.' Against Opal's protest he put the child into a flour sack and weighed it with some small scales. 'These scales is a liar, Ope. They say only seven pounds and that can't be right. He'll weigh ten pounds or I don't know a thing to say about.'

A few days later he dug among a stack of papers for an almanac. They would see what kind of child they had got this time. October was not, he imagined, a good month for a child to be born in, because he knew more than one man not worth his salt who had been born in this month. There was Chris Hempley of Annis, as worthless a fellow as ever walked on two legs. 'This Chris, what I have a mind for now, shot his grandmother out Camas way and hid her in a well, throwed her body in a well, as I seem to remember. Or mebbe it was a cellar, and it seems now liken it was his mother or his wife what he shot. . . . Well, let's see. It says he'll be gentle, open, and pure. He will have inventive genius, it says, and a a-p-t-i-t-u-d-e for mechanic arts. He will be handy with tools, quick at figgers, it says. I guess

that Chris Hempley shot his wife and threwed her in a well; that is how it comes to me now. It says he'll have disease of the s-p-l-e-e-n. What's that, do you know? . . . I ain't no satisfactory idea a that. I ain't never heared a that, have you? But October, except for that-air disease, don't seem no bad month to be borned, does it? If he's handy with tools he'll help on the ranch a sight to say about. Mebbe he'll be a great inventor, Ope. It won't be nothun to surprise me if he is. . . . Say, Ope, I got a idea worth a man's mind. Why couldn't we make our kids be born in the best months? I'll bet nobody ever thought a that afore now. Don't you think we could?'

He said he would discover which of the months were best to be born in. He began with the September horoscope and read the months through, spelling out the difficult words, asking her if she knew what they meant, and pausing to approve or disapprove. He began with September because its horoscope was his own. It said that he would reach honor through personal merit; that he was honest, mild, agreeable. 'I don't know how much honor I'll get afore I die,' he said, looking at her doubtfully. 'A man never knows. But that last is plumb true, ain't it? God knows I am honest and I ain't hard to get along with. It says I'm not easy f-a-t-h-o-m-e-d. What in hell does that mean, do you know? It says I have a strong will and that's true as all outdoors. I'm slow gettun mad, it says, and slow quietun down, and that's another fact worth thinkun about. When I get mad I'm plumb mad for weeks.' He stared at

her for a few moments, thinking quietly of his long periods of rage, thinking of them with obvious pleasure. He began to read again and suddenly he stood up, trembling a little. 'God a-mighty, Ope, what have I been tellun you! It says I'll get rich from hard work in fields. . . . It says fields a science and some others I can't seem to know very well, but I guess it means any fields. I never heared of a field a science ——'

Opal rose a little on her pillow and asked him to read hers. He turned to July. Her horoscope said she would lead a life of power and activity, that she was independent and fit to command. Her health would be excellent, except that she would have a weak heart and some strange disease of her lungs. Her morals were good, but she was fickle in love and she had a natural repulsion against marriage.

Dock laid the almanac down and looked at her soberly. 'I been a-suspicionun that,' he told her. 'I knowed all along that you was fickle and I suspicioned you disliked marriage.'

They stared at one another for a few moments.

Said Opal: 'I ain't no more fickle than you. That don't tell the truth about me.'

'Sure it does, Ope. There ain't no reason this thing should lie, not a reason a man can think of. I never see a woman borned in July what wasn't fickle, not one.'

'That don't say the truth about me,' said Opal, and her dark eyes flashed. 'If you want to believe that, why, believe it and nobody will care.'

More thoughtfully now Dock read the other horoscopes, moving his lips as he read, frowning at this new perplexity. 'I never see a July woman what wasn't fickle,' he muttered. 'Not in my life-long did I ever see one.' He looked at her again, almost with distrust. 'If I was to marry again I'd ask the woman what month she was borned in. That's the first thing I'd ask her.' And after a little while he added: 'Well, we won't have no July kids, that's fixed now.'

April, he said, was a good month. People born in April were lofty and generous, of superior mind and will; religious and artistic and with a great love for the outdoors. They were undaunted. They became great lawyers or great generals. 'Keep that-air month in mind,' he said, without looking at her. 'That's a good month to be borned in, that and September.'

He wanted no children born in May. They would be stubborn and proud and they, too, would be fickle in love. They were fond of rich foods and they had ungovernable tempers. 'That ain't no decent month. That and July. Don't forget them two.' Nor was June a bad month. People born in June were pleasing, honest, and noble; but they suffered with fevers and they were victims of plagues. The month of August was excellent in some respects. People of this month had lofty minds, too, and generous hearts. They were industrious, affectionate, and made good leaders; they were faithful in love. But they loved pleasures and luxuries, and they died of rheumatism and frightful diseases of their kid-

.

neys. He didn't want pleasure-chasing youngones and they would be of little use on a farm if they were always sick. 'I want well kids,' he said. 'I'm lookun now for months that ain't sick months. Angels a God, I don't want a house full of sick kids!' November was another month to be excluded. Those born in this month had some very desirable qualities, but they were fickle and dreamy and they suffered with chronic headaches. 'I've knowed people borned in November and they was all plumb fools. Looken that-air Bertha Kribbs. She run away from her man and went with that sneakun Jim Blodgett and the devil chased her right in her grave. I knowed some poetry what said,

Them what's borned in bleak November
Will have sorrows to remember,

and I never see it fail yet.'

December, he said, was a tolerable month for people to be born in. They would be strictly honest, industrious, peaceable, and very skillful with their hands. They would fret about small things, but nobody, he supposed, was perfect. 'Them-there is our months, Ope. April, September, December, and mebbe one or two more. But we don't want too many kids in the same month. They would be all alike without they was in different months. We want all the good kinds of kids there is to be had. All we got to do is kallate our time right and we can have the kind a kids we want. . . . I wonder why other people don't do it that way, instead havun bad

kids mixed up with good. God a-mighty, raisun a good family ain't hard when you know how.'

Dock thought of the matter often, as time went, naming for Opal the birth-month of people whom he liked, of people whom he disliked. Not always, he admitted, could he be sure of the month. Rastus McHenry, clearly enough, was born in May, because he was fickle, he had fiery passions, and he had suffered all his life with kidney disease; but Junius Tripley, on the other hand, might have been born either in April or November, because people of both these months were very religious and Junius, for years and years now, had been seeing ghosts and talking in the gift of tongues.

'When I study this business a little more,' said Dock one evening, 'I'll be able to say right off a person's month by just lookun at him. We'll name this kid of ourn Dick. I always liked the name Dick for some reason.' His father, he said, was born in March, as all the world could tell at a glance, because he was the most stubborn man that ever breathed the breath of life and he was a pioneer. There had been no tougher pioneer in Idaho than old Joe Hunter. Had she ever heard how his father had once slain a grizzly with his bare hands? It had been long years ago when grizzlies were as common as jack rabbits, and that was something for a man to think about. A pioneer who slew grizzlies with his naked hands could have been born in no month but March.

But Opal did not like the name Dick. It was a

nickname for Richard, anyway, and she hated nicknames. She once knew a Richard, Richard Towne was his name, and he had been a dyed-in-the-wool skunk if there ever was one. She had never known a Richard worth his salt and pepper. There had been Richard Burgess, a near neighbor, who whaled his wife and used a hawthorn on his kids.

'But I've knowed some good Dicks, Ope. I don't like the name Richard myself, but Dick's a fair name to go by. There's Dick Wynn, and he's worth a man's say. And there's Dick Sanders, as well-set-up a young man as ever plowed a furrow. Both them Dicks, I'm beginnun to see, was borned in September, or mebbe in April.' Did she know Charles North, that sheep-faced blackguard who married Liz Andrews? There was a man born in July if there ever was one. In July or February, beyond a doubt.

'I like the name of Francis,' ventured Opal, looking down at her sleeping child. 'I've always liked the name of Francis.'

Dock stared at her. 'Why, God sake, don't you know a thing? Frances, that-air is a woman's name. I've knowed a many Frances in my time. Frances Chadwick, I've knowed her my life-long.'

'It's a man's name or a woman's name. I guess I've knowed Francis Chuzzer all my life, too.'

'Francis Chuzzer?' said Dock suspiciously. 'Ain't that the sorrel-top guy you went with afore you met me?'

'He ain't no more a sorrel-top than you. That's

all you are, come to think about it. And he ain't half bald like you, neither.'

'Well, you don't name my son after no ninkem-poop liken that guy. How in God a-mighty's name you ever went with him is plumb outside my figgerun. Without it was them baby ways a hisen . . .'

'If I'd a-married him I wouldn't be in this God-forsaken hole now. I'd be in the valley now, like a white woman should be. That's where I'd be to-day, the more I think about it.'

'Well, the team's ready, missus, any time you want to hook up and pull out. I won't stop you, not for a minute I won't. Go back to him, if that's on your mind. But you won't take that kid. That-air kid's got to stay here and help me make them hills grow wheat liken this was God's country.' He was silent for a little while before adding: 'If I had that Francis Chuzzer here I'd knock all the daylight's outen him. That's all of the big he is in my mind. In all my life-long days I never see a more worseless man, not in all my days.'

Dock grew weary of grubbing, day in and day out, week after week, bending over the brush until his back ached with the pain of it. He tried to plow, loading his disc-gang with boulders to force it into the earth; but it skidded round the patches of brush or where there was no brush it turned up only two slender ribbons of sod, so dry and firmly linked with grass roots that they lay unbroken in loops and odd shapes. He sharpened the discs and got larger boul-

ders, but the ground resisted the sharp edge and the weight. Sometimes, when hoarse from cursing or exhausted by his efforts, he would sit on the plow and stare at the sky, searching it for signs of rain. Storms had swept the upper valley, hanging from the sky in slanting sheets, one sheet flowing after another; or they had moved in a gray mass like a visible wind. They had skirted the river and gone over the lower foot-hills and westward. Eastward there had been storms, too, coming down Pine Creek and rolling over the Swan Valley benchland, filling Swan Valley for days with heavy fog and then turning up the river to Grand Valley. Over on the river there had been storms, troops of clouds moving up the river bottoms, along its gorge, from one valley to the next. But upon the hills of Antelope there had been no drop of rain since he came here.

The few trees were naked and looking more dwarfed now without their leaves; tumbleweeds had gathered in coves or lodged among bushes; and on ridges and hillsides spots of white earth grew larger as foliage withered and grass died. And as Dock watched all these things of earth and sky, the rains circling around him on all sides, the earth drying to powder under his feet, he came to feel, he told Opal one day, a great and strange loneliness everywhere about, in no way alive as he knew life, but brooding over the hills. It was above the sky or invisible in the air beneath. He could feel its presence in the earth and above and around, complete. Perhaps it was only a crazy fancy of his, born of labor too se-

vere; but wherever he went now it was with him, except down on the river, and when there he seemed to leave it behind for an hour, up in the sky beyond the rim of the mountain. The almost solid presence of it would come upon him, with the force of something near, when he was uprooting a bush or suddenly when he was walking home. He would look up at the sky then, as if expecting to see something there, though he little knew what; but always he saw the same altitudes of passionless gray, the same silent hills lying around him, the same solitudes near and far. Everything, below and above, was serenely lifeless and calm, the gray tent of the sky, the gray floor of the hills. And he was a small moving thing, busy at the breast of this vast indifference, making his tiny sounds among these great solitudes.

Sometimes he was terrified almost by the invisible power around him that wore only a serene mask of death and held within itself the terrible mystery that would awaken into new life, another lovely spring. Sometimes the thud of his grubbing hoe would come like a strange sound out of the loneliness, or in his ears would awaken the echo of an oath, as of an unfamiliar sound never before heard; and upon him he would feel a sudden pressure as if the sky had come down. Or again, more commonly as time went, he would be aware of a flash of kinship for all these things as if he had long known them, as if their ways were his own. He was bewildered, he said, and the look on his face filled Opal for a moment with terror.

He left his work in the fields, dreading the loneli-

ness out there, and laid the floor of the house and built a large cistern in the earth. For many days he did not go far out, except to haul water or to bring hay from the valley. He talked often and long to Opal, but not quite with the boastfulness of his old way. He did not swear so much, and his voice was not so loud when he grew warm among his dreams. She could name the girls, he said, and he would name the boys. Opal deliberated and agreed. She said all the girls would be named for precious stones: there would be Emerald and Ruby and Garnet and Sapphire and Jewel —— But Dock interrupted her with a loud oath and demanded to know how many girls she expected to have.

‘How many?’ asked Opal, looking down where he was heaving earth up from the cistern. ‘How many boys do you think you’ll have, I’d like to know? I guess I can have as many girls as you have boys.’

‘Well, we don’t want too many, Ope, not for the kingdom of heaven. Ain’t that a cloud out there, or what do I see down here? . . . Six kids, I figger, will be all of the many we oughten have. We oughten have four boys and two girls, because girls don’t make a cent in a thousand year. Six kids will be enough in God a-mighty’s name.’

For a little while Opal looked down at him, wondering many things. What if she were to have twelve children? — or even twenty? She had heard of women who had thirty. . . . She looked down at him more intently, at the thin locks of hair lying this way and that, at his dirty scalp which he had

not washed since coming here. There was sweat on his hands, on his brown neck where the shirt collar fell away. He had tied his suspenders around his waist, the movement of his shoulders being freer, he said, without them, and on his back was a dark cross where they had been. Perhaps she would have twelve children, because her mother had borne twelve, seven of them now dead.

'Mebbe I'll have more than six children,' she said, hitting him with a small clod. 'I don't see no reason why I shouldn't.'

Dock rested on his shovel and stared up at her. 'It takes two to maken twelve kids,' he said. 'I ain't got my mind set for no dozen. Is that-air a cloud, Ope, or is that just dust I see? . . . Six is all the many I figger on.'

Opal was thoughtful again. After a little she said: 'But I might have more than six. I might have twelve, I say.'

'I guess not without I say yes. If I say six is all the many I want, why, six is all you'll get. You can't have kids without my help, I reckon.' And he grinned up at her, showing tobacco-stained teeth with spaces between.

Opal hated his teeth and his mouth, with its circle of short stiff hair, and his large pale eyes now gleaming with triumph. She could imagine now, as she felt it last night, the pressure upon her mouth of his beard stubble. He was spitting in his hands and rubbing the shovel handle, his grin fading.

'Tell me if that turns out to be a storm. The cal-

endar man says this-here next week will be plumb full a storm. It will rain pitchforks, he says, all over this-here country.'

He worked again, heaving the earth up with long powerful swings, speaking a few words as he forced the shovel into the earth or remaining silent for a long while. He would cement the cistern, he said, and cover it over with planks. The principal trouble with cisterns was that squirrels and mice tumbled into them and rotted. Sometimes larger animals fell in, even badgers and woodchucks. But he would take care of all these. He would make the cistern almost air-tight and he would pump the water out. Next spring he would shovel it full of melting snow and there would be a plenty of water to last all summer.

Was a storm really coming out there, or was it only another cloud of dust? . . . A storm would come soon now, because the sun for many weeks had been drawing water and when a setting sun drew water, a storm was lurking somewhere near. He knew all the signs of nature, he supposed, for he had been watching them, learning their meanings, for years and years. Wet moons and dry moons, storm winds and drouth winds, hawks and doves and owls, coyotes and wild geese, he knew all these and the portents of their ways and sounds. Mourning doves of late had been more plaintive, hawks nearer the earth, and the moon had been ringed with fog. These meant storm.

'But why won't I have more than six children, if

I want more?' asked Opal, after a longer silence. 'What's to stop me?'

Dock leaned on his shovel and looked up at her. 'There's ways for to stop that,' he said, and gave her a knowing scrutiny. 'I know ways. I ain't lived my whole life to no account.'

Opal's face darkened. 'I guess you mean to take pills or something. Just forget about it because I won't.'

'Them's one way, but I know others.'

'Just forget about it. There won't be no way in my case.'

'We'll see. Say, get smart now and I won't let you have another kid in all your days. Not another one to say about.'

The storm came, but it was not one of rain. It was of snow, riding fiercely on the breast of a great wind, coming at noon up the river and sweeping over Antelope like a wild dark night. The earth was shaken by thunder and pale lightning flashed without showing the sky above or beyond. She had never seen thunder and lightning in a snowstorm, Opal said, now standing by a window against which the wind was blindly driving its frozen sheets. Snow fell to the earth and was scattered; it was gathered again into scurrying clouds and banked around bushes or piled in quiet coves. It lay inches deep in the vales when hills were still bare. A swift sudden fury came down from the sky and hurled the stovepipe from the house, and Opal saw it roll over and over like a

tumbleweed and lodge among brush. Hard snow was driven with the sound of small shot against the panes; a lull followed in an eddy of the storm and then a wind leapt out and shook the house.

Dock said he would gather his horses, and Opal, after tucking covers around her sleeping child, said she would go with him. There was a great roaring overhead as of a mightier wind riding down. Snow was driven in white streams among the bushes, in white sheets over the earth. Up over a hard bare ridge it flowed in white waves and went off in thin clouds up the sky. It had lodged in the tops of bushes, in the manes and tails of horses, and around the hoofs of each it was banked to their fetlocks.

Before nightfall the wind went and the snow changed to large soft flakes. The storm hung in a great cloud that filled the sky, its lower side falling evenly away in a continuous dark movement and raveling into broken descending lines near the earth. Dock said he wondered why clouds were gray when made of white snow, and Opal went over, where he stood by a window, and looked out. Rain clouds should be dark, he supposed, but snow clouds should be white and the whole sky ought to be white now. That was a matter to perplex a man's mind. Nature was a strange and mysterious power, he was beginning to see, much like something huge and alive and full of its own ways. When in its presence, as now for weeks past, he sometimes felt small as a mouse and of no importance whatever. He sometimes felt tiny and scared like a mouse that has

missed its hole and is running blindly among dangers. And at other times he felt as if he could put his arms around it, far around the whole of it somehow, and make it yield to him, make it moving and supple and eager like a woman's body.

He would have to get out logs for a stable and cedar posts for fences to be built next spring. Never would he let his horses stand out in storms like this, as some men did. He would rather go out into the storm himself, naked and hungry and with no warm place to sleep, than to let his horses shiver out there with only snow for a blanket.

Another thing that troubled his thoughts was why clouds seemed to be as large and dense after a storm as before it. He had noticed this. As the snow fell, why didn't they thin and disappear? There were many matters worth thinking about, once a man could find time. Did she know how many posts it would take, placed one rod apart, to fence a hundred and sixty acres? Six hundred and forty, he told her, and was glad to see astonishment on her face. 'Six hundred and forty posts I gotten dig out when the snow's deepest. Snow'll be twenty feet deep in them mountains. That's all of the deep I'll have to wade, just twenty feet, cuttun and draggun posts to the river. God a-mighty, that's a job for a man with hair on his chest.' But why, asked Opal, did he not get them next spring or summer when there would be no snow. Dock stared at her and drew forth his plug of tobacco. 'For a farmer's wife, Ope, you got the whole world beat. Summer posts won't last two

year. They rot plumb off in no time to say about.'

The snow was falling so thick now that Opal could not see a serviceberry bush, twenty feet away. Cedar posts cut in January would not rot off in thirty years; not if they were set in damp earth. Down in the valley were posts still standing which his father had set over forty years ago. Two or three of them had fallen over, but they had been eaten into by ants or they had been torn up by winds. Why God made ants was another matter to perplex an honest mind. Winds, he supposed, had been made to drive storms over the world; but ants were of no use whatever, unless they were intended to feed bears. Bears ate them, as any one could tell by tasting their flesh or by smelling their blood.

But why, asked Opal, after deliberating all these things, why did he not use aspens for posts? They were easy to get and they were lovelier to look at. But aspens, Dock said, would rot off in a short while, even if cut in winter time. They were the most worthless of all the trees God had made. Cedars were good trees, and maples and red pines; but aspens and cottonwoods weren't worth the sod they grew on. God might as well have made good trees instead of poor ones, nighthawks instead of magpies, dragon-flies instead of ants, and elk and deer instead of skunks and coyotes. 'Without I could a-made a better job of this-here world, Ope, why, I'm a plumb fool to speak about it. Some says we can't understand God's ways and God made all things for the best. Mebbe that's so, but I can't see it with the

eyes I got now. I tell you what I think. I think things ain't turned out the way God figgered. I think things is just a-gettun away from God's control, that's what I think. And if you'll give your mind to it a little bit, why, you'll see I'm right.'

The storm fell until Antelope was rolling hills of white. Bushes sank to the earth under its weight, or they spread their limbs wide and hid bowers of darkness. Back in these cool recesses Opal sometimes saw birds or heard them twittering when she passed; and from these places came the cool sweet smell of autumn things with winter upon them. Dock was getting logs for a stable now, working each day from dawn until dark, going down to the river and cutting trees and bringing a load home each night. Often when he was away, Lem Higley would come over and talk to Opal while she moved among her household tasks, or he would remain silent for a long while, watching her closely with his small deep-set eyes. She did not want him to come and she never told Dock that he had been there. She hated him, his ugly sly face, his jumping up to do this for her or that, his endless talk of what he had done and what he would do. Only rarely did she speak, even when he asked a question, and she almost never looked at him. He wanted to wash her dishes or he wanted to take her child in his arms. 'That's a fine kid, by God,' he would say. 'That's as fine a kid as a man ever looked at. Looks like his mother, he does.' He would make furtive allusions to Opal's beauty or he

would hint slyly of his surprise at her coming here. And while she listened, Opal wondered what Dock would say, what he would do, if he learned that Lem Higley was coming over two or three times a week. She trembled a little when her thoughts measured what he might do. Her manner toward Lem became colder, even offensive, but he did not seem to mind.

'I'll be a-movun over here, by God, I will,' he said one day. 'This gets to seem more like home than my own place.' And Opal turned upon him in anger. Why didn't he work once in a while and why did he run around, wasting his time and that of others? Though a little abashed, Lem said: 'I ain't in no fit humor to work. When snow's deep as a horse's belly I'm lonesome as all get-out.' Over the hill along the way he came was a deep trail now, twisting off in the snow. Dock certainly had seen the trail. Opal wondered why he had not spoken of it, of what he was thinking when he left each morning, when he returned each night.

'I don't believe in workun the plumb year around. I'll tell you what I think of life.' And for an hour he told her, talking swiftly at her, rising from his chair or sitting down again, filling the stove with wood or putting snow into its reservoir, but never ceasing to talk. Life, he said, was a complete failure from end to end. He had learned that much about it, merely by thinking while other people worked, by watching other people and seeing that they were failures, whatever they did, wherever they went. Once upon a time, long ago, he had believed in a God; but now

he knew that God was a crazy unreality about which people talked and prayed and were unhappy. That last was a point worth considering for a moment. The unhappiest people in the world, he had learned, were those who went to church. The happiest people were those who swore loudest, drank deepest, and worked only when they had to. There was Jad Thurgenstowen. No man under the sun could swear as long and loud as Jad could. The air actually turned black when Jad got warmed up to his job of cursing everything. People had been saying for years now that the Lord would strike Jad dead in his tracks, but the Lord never had, never would, because the Lord seemed to love wicked people and to be kinder to them. Jad thrived on blasphemy.

‘That man,’ said Lem, ‘gets healthier each time he has a good long fit of cussun. Every time that man cusses he grows a good inch, it seems to me. I’ll tell you, when I was a kid I used to be no bigger’n the nose on your face there. I was just a little whiffet. I ain’t a big man now, but God knows what I’d a-been if I hadn’t cussed myself to some size. Pay no mind to me without you like what I’m sayun. But that’s the way I figger the thing out. All the big men I know don’t have no more religion than a dead rat. There’s Jad and there’s Ole Humbersum and down in the valley there’s Jeff Weeg. And all the little men I’ve knowed has been stunted by religion. That’s what was well-nigh my ruin and not another thing in God’s world. Ever since I don’t believe in a God no more, I been healthier and all. And I enjoy

life more. Pay no mind to me without you like what I say. But that's how I figger it all out and life ain't no mystery to me any longer. I see it all clear as the outside of a barn and that's why I ain't workun today. Say, I'll die in the end and what'll all that-there work mean then? Not a solitary thing in all the blessed kingdom of God.'

Sometimes Lem would come over at night and he and Dock would sit around a hot stove and talk of things that perplexed them. Opal would listen to them, or she would go early to bed and think of the great white world beyond her window, now frozen to the cold stars. Dock would tell of the posts he was getting, of their size and length, or of how they were broken in two when he shot them over ledges; of the kind of wheat he would plant and of the snowfall and the promise of a good year. And Lem would talk of posts, too, and of the rich soil in Antelope and the high cost of farm machinery; but more frequently he talked of his philosophy of life, turning from the main way of religion to seek new ideas or to explain something that baffled Dock. He talked of people he had known and things they had done, queer people and strange things.

'Say, Dock, by God, you know that-there Hansie Hansen. I always thought he was just a plumb fool, didn't you?'

'That's all he ever was in my mind.'

'I'll tell you what he done this winter. He goes to bed and stays right there most all the time. He wants to live to be a hundred and all long-lived things

goes to bed in winter time, he says. He was tellun me all the animals that hole-up, bears and all. They live longer, he says, than animals that stays out and gets frost bit. He says cold's what kills humans off. Look at eggs, he says, have to have a even heat to hatch, and all baby animals, he says, just die off when they get cold. He figgers that gettun cold and hot and hot and cold, back and forth from winter to summer, is what kills humans dead as a old snake hide. That's what he says, Dock ——'

'God a-mighty. He's a worseless fool for sure.'

'He says all them-there people what live on the North Pole, they die off before they know what it's all about. They die off, he says, before they're old enough to marry, just freeze and thaw to death by turns. And, by God, Dock, that sounds reason to my way of thinkun. Don't pay no mind to it without it fits your figgers, but that's the way I sized it all up when I started a-thinkun deep about life.'

'God a-mighty,' said Dock again, and stared at Lem with renewed thoughtfulness. 'I've heard crazy fools in my day, but not another one as worseless as that-air fool. Why that woman married him is a riddle to maken a man's mind spin round liken a top. My mind aches liken old sixty when I think about that.'

'I'm just like you, Dock. I can't figger that out neither. Ella Hansen is some woman to look at, if I don't say it to her face. She makes a man weak in his knees just to be around her, them eyes a hern

and them smiles throwed at every man darkens her door.'

'He thinks he's sick, that-air fool does,' said Dock, looking round to see if Opal were listening. 'He's the most no-account any woman ever give stomach trouble to. I'll tell you, Lem, it's too much coffee and not missus makes him groan all day liken a stuck hog. Somehow or rather I can't stand that-air guy. Some day I aim to crack his jaw wide open ——'

'Other night when I was over there he was a-groanun fit to kill hisself. By God, I never see such faces as he was pullun at everything in sight. And his missus, you should ought to a-seen her, a-pullun faces at him behind his back and a-thumbun her nose at him and a-winkun at me ——'

'Ain't that a sight for to make a man sick! That's the way they done when I was there. Him a-tryun to puke on the floor and her a-flirtun with me liken all fury. . . . In all the years I been a-breathun the breath a life I never seen such a worseless no-account.'

Each time Lem came over he told of queerer people, or stranger things. Opal imagined he was inventing his yarns, but Dock said they were all true, as true as daylight, he said, because he knew the people and their ways. But Opal distrusted Lem's cagerness, his obvious groping, more and more, for tales that would make Dock stare at him with wonder, for yarns that would make Dock exclaim, 'God a-mighty! Who ever heard the like a that!'

'If I told you them lies, why, you'd never believe a word of it, not a word. But you believe everything that fool says.'

And Dock answered: 'Without you believe it, go over and looken Hansie some day. Go see him and then don't talk liken a fool.'

One evening Lem told of Tee Wynn, a pale slender young man who had moved up with his people and settled a homestead south of Hansie's. Tee, in the way of Lem's tale, was making a map of the stars. At midnight, three or four times in a week, he would climb to the tallest hill and sit in the snow and watch the moon and the stars. He had made a big chart of the sky, with all the stars grouped and named. When a star fell he made a note of it and waited to see whether one would come in its place or whether a vacant spot would be left in the sky.

'He calls all them stars Bill and John and Jim and such names,' said Lem. 'He's got each one named and he knows their size and all. He says when a star falls there ain't no star comes to take its place. Says they'll all fall down in time and there won't be no star left. And he says the moon's gettun smaller and smaller like a puddle of water.'

'For God sake, Lem, that's a lie. Them stars was put there to light the night and mebbe some'll fall, but God'll stick new stars out in their place. New stars ——'

'Well, I don't know, Dock. Tee Wynn, he's studied them for years and that's what he says. He says well-nigh a hundred stars has tumbled out

since he first watched them. There's only two thousand and some odd, he says, and if a hundred tumbles down in a year or less, why, they'll all tumble down before he dies. Mebbe he's plumb wrong, Dock, I ain't to say. Pay no mind to it if you think contrarywise. But, by God, them stars keeps a-fallun ——'

'And God keeps a-puttun them back, I tell you, Lem. Mebbe them stars wears out liken anything else and new ones has to be put out all the time. That's reason for any man's mind.'

'Well, where does all them stars go what falls? That's what Tee Wynn is a-figgerun out now. He'll figger it all out, he says. He's figgerun out how far them stars is away. And say, why does that-there moon keep a-shrivelun up like a snowball?'

'That moon don't swivel up liken no snowball, Lem. That moon's as big as it ever was. God a-mighty!'

On an evening late in January, Lem introduced again the subject of the moon and stars. He had been doing some thinking of his own, he said, and he had learned that life offered problems that were not to be settled in a hurry, not without being seen from all sides and searched with all the sight a man had. Opal wondered at the seriousness of his voice, at his sober way of staring at Dock while he spoke; at the depth of his mood as if he had come upon a new world or had found things in the old one that no other man could tell of. And she wondered, too, at Dock, who seemed to be strangely moved by this

little fellow's endless chatter. He would look at her with large mute eyes, questioning her, imploring her attention.

Hansie Hansen, she learned, had bought a gun, a high-powered rifle that would shoot farther and straighter than any other with lock, stock, and barrel. One evening, when the moon was large and low, he had sat on his doorstep and shot at it.

'He shot a whole box of shells at that moon and them shells cost six cents apiece. And he hit it, too, or I'm the worst liar God ever made. He shot it plumb full a holes and I set right there and seen him do it. I'd never a-believed it, Dock, if I hadn't a-seen it with my own eyes.'

'He hit that-air moon?' asked Dock, looking at Opal. 'You say you see him hit it?'

'With my own eyes, Dock, I seen him hit it. The first two or three shots he missed because he didn't have his range. Then he started pluggun it right off. Every shot would leave a little round hole like, that would close up. That moon is made a flame, Dock, and the hole would shut right up. But say, come over here. See all that-there black down next the center? That's where he hit it most. How far away is that moon, I'd wonder?'

'How far away is that-air moon, Ope, do you know?'

Opal gave them a long look of disgust and pity. She turned away to her child, but after a little she said: 'It's too far away to be shot with a gun, I

know that. I don't know how far away it is, but it can't be hit with no gun.'

Dock and Lem looked at each other. 'Why, my God,' said Lem, looking out again at the moon, 'it ain't so far off, that moon ain't. You watch it when it goes down and you'll see it's right against the mountain over there. Why, it goes right around the earth, that moon does. . . . How far away is them stars, do you reckon?'

'Some of them stars is only about far as the moon,' said Dock. 'The evenun star ain't enough more far to say about.'

'That's what I think, Dock. They're smaller, that's all.'

'I figger a man mighten take a cannon and shoot that-air moon right outen the sky. That would be a sight worth lookun at.'

'I guess you think,' said Opal pityingly, 'I guess you think that moon don't light the whole earth. It just lights this ugly hole you call Antelope. It don't light the world thousands of miles south of here and thousands of miles east and west.'

Dock and Lem again looked at each other. Said Dock: 'I guess she's busted your figgers in two. Mebbe he didn't hit the moon a-tall.'

'And that moon,' Opal went on, 'ain't made out of flame neither. I don't know what it's made out of, but it ain't flame.'

'Why, of course it's flame,' said Lem. 'Did you ever hear of a thing give light what wasn't flame? It's a fire, that moon is. Just like that sun's a fire and all them stars.'

'It's got to be a flame, Ope, or it wouldn't give no light. What's the matter of you anyway?'

'Not a thing's the matter with me. But that moon ain't flame. I read once what it is, but I don't remember that neither. But it ain't flame.'

'Then how does it give light?' asked Lem.

'I don't remember that, but it ain't flame. Didn't you never hear of mountains on the moon?'

'Mountains on the moon!' cried Dock. 'God a-mighty, Ope, don't be a plumb fool.'

'Now that I study more deep in the matter,' said Lem, 'I see we ain't got it all figgered out clear as I thought. I can see that I'll have to think more about it. But he hit that moon, Dock, or I been a-drinkun too much coffee. Why, God all Friday, I could see the holes them bullets' made!'

February came in on a great blizzard that shrieked round the house and filled the white vales with blinding storms. Winds swept snow from the hills and piled it deep in the hollows. On most of Dock's farm, on the south and west slopes, the ground was almost bare and snow was gathered in clouds and dropped beyond a hill on the north side. Dock brought the chickens indoors, some with their rumps bare of feathers now, some with their feet frozen as hard as stones, and fenced them into the corner behind the stove. After a while the house smelt of dung and warm wet feathers. Opal said the stink made her sick and she went into the cold bedroom to vomit. When she came back, pale

and shivering, she heard Dock counting months on his fingers. January, February, March, April, May, June, July, August, September — Their next child, he said, would be born in September and would be honest and of strong will. It would be a boy, he hoped, and afterward Opal could have a girl if she wanted one. She could have two girls if she wanted two. They would have two girls and four boys and not another soul. The hen came from the corner and walked about the room, her frozen feet making hollow thumping sounds on the boards. Outside the snow was driving blindly in clouds like smoke against the window, throwing a line of white under the door, coming in the west gable and sifting like powder upon the stove. A wind struck the house and shrieked and went off moaning among the frozen bushes and trees.

Opal said he would have to take the chickens away or she would vomit again. Dock gathered them into a sack and went out into the storm, the wind driving him off the pathway, his form growing fainter in the white gloom and vanishing. He was gone a long time, and when Opal looked out again she could not see the woodpile, ten feet beyond her door. The house creaked and shuddered and little moaning sounds ran along the rafters and sounds from the walls hummed faintly in the stove. When Dock returned the door fell open at his touch and a bitter wind entered the house, cold and swift against all the warm things and gone in a moment. He smelt of the stable and there were horsehairs on his

hands and on his sleeves. He had been currying his horses, he said, as he held his gnarled hands above the heat. From under the door the ribbon of white spread to a thin sheet, filling cracks and reaching toward the stove, its outer edge darkening into water.

It was the worst storm he had ever seen, said Dock, turning his back to the fire and rubbing his knotty hands; the devil was driving the storm out there and all nature was going hellety belt to ruin. It was a bad storm for crops, too, because all the wet next spring would be in the vales and the hills would be barren and dry. Streams would run as large as rivers and the river would overflow its banks.

Drawing a chair to the stove, he sat with his knees thrust into the oven and Opal sat by him, her child on her lap. Overhead wild things were running with the winds, swift things of the storm with cold feet. There was a great sound overhead like the sound of a moving herd of cattle at midnight. Fragments of sound ran earthward with the driven wind and flowed off in white billows of snow, or they were shattered into screeches of sharp wails and shot like lances of sound through the gloom. 'All nature is hell-bent out there liken death was after it.' Moaning undertones came in waves over the hills and were split into piercing cries and whistles against the sharp corners of the house, among the naked bushes and trees. Vibrant sounds hummed down the stovepipe and shuddered in the iron lids.

And then a wind flung its breast against the door, hurling it wide open, and a little cloud of snow came in. 'Angels of God!' roared Dock and slammed the door shut. He placed a chair against it, tipped on its heels, and came back to the stove. After looking down at his child for a few moments, he said: 'What's a-matter that-air kid, Ope? When I was only a little wart I had more life than he's got.' He began to search the room, to explore among papers and clothes. 'For God a-mighty's sake, Ope, where's that almanac, do you know? Why do you have to hide everything liken you was afraid to death of thieves?' Opal said nothing. She was looking fondly at her child, kissing him, murmuring nonsense in his ear. Dock found the almanac and read the October horoscope again. 'Do you reckon that-air kid's got melancholy all of so soon? It says he'll be melancholy. Is that what's the miss with him, I wonder?' He read the horoscope many times, mumbling the words, pausing now and again to consider, and then putting the almanac away. 'I don't like the way that kid shows no interest in life a-tall. I ain't heared a decent-sized grunt outen him for the longest time to think about. Do you know how to read bumps, Ope?'

Dock made a move to feel the child's head, but Opal drew him quickly away.

'No, I don't know how to read bumps! And you leave him alone.'

'If you knowed how to read bumps,' said Dock staring dubiously at the babe's head, 'why, we

mighten be able to find out what's on his mind. I don't like his melancholy, Ope. I aim to hear a good howl outen him for a spell.'

For a little while they were silent, Opal slowly rocking her child and looking with hard eyes at the swirling snow outside, Dock brooding with his face in his hands. At each sound of terror in the storm, she would draw the babe closer, her fingers slipping down to his legs, to his feet. Dock chewed tobacco and now and then raised the stove lid and spit upon the flame. The storm outside deepened and twilight entered the room. Light came from the grate and made shadows dance on the floor and other shadows crept among things and cloaked their silence. Out of the night the storm took new fury and Opal could see the snow growing darker, flowing in dark waves that were torn wide open or circled by the arm of a wind and carried swiftly away.

Somewhere out in the dark and the cold, buried deep under, was the tiny grave of her pup that Dock had killed because he jumped upon the stove and put his soft nose into a kettle of mush. Dock had eaten of the mush before she had seen him and cried out to him. And she was sorry now that she had told him; she would be sorry all the days of her life, because of Dock's rage and the terrible thing he did. And Dock had been sorry, too, after he had seized the pup by its hind legs and with one horrible blow broken its neck across the corner of the house. 'God a-mighty,' he had said, and she had seen his mouth tremble, his eyes look away as if appalled by

what he had done. And in memory now she was going back along the experience, washing the blood from the house, digging a little grave for the pup and holding him for a long while in her lap before dropping his limp body into the hole and piling earth upon it. In her body she had felt a stirring pain, even as she felt it now, and she had felt a hot burning in her breast and throat. It was little wonder if her child was melancholy, or anything else terrible or misshapen or unloved. She looked at Dock where he still sat hunched before the oven, his face hidden in his hands and his mind full of nobody knew what dark and lonely things; and she looked again at her child and lowered her lips to his warm soft cheek.

IV

SIGNS of spring began to appear, in the lengthening days, in the settling of the snow, in the passing of cold from the trees and in the melting of ice from the aspen trunks. Dock grew restless as the days passed, hungry for work, for the smell of sod. He would wander aimlessly over his farm, sometimes trudging through snow knee-deep or going upon the hills to measure its depth there; or he would return, wet and eager, and shovel melting snow into his cistern.

One day Opal saw him walking back and forth and everywhere over the hills with a forked stick in his hands. There was water upon these hills, he said, and at no great depth; there were streams of water running through far above the river. He saw no good reason why a man could not have a well here and perhaps a windmill and even an orchard, if he wanted one. To find where the water came nearest the earth's surface was the simplest matter in the world. His father, many years ago, had found many wells for valley folk and had come to be known as the water wizard. And when Opal asked how he would discover the water, he cut a serviceberry bush and told her to watch with all the sight she had. All bushes and trees knew where water was, he said, pausing for a moment to search her face; they turned down and found it, and what trees knew

a wise man might know. 'They twist the bark right offen theirselves when they start a-huntun water. They twist the hide right outen a man's hand.' Dead limbs would not turn down; they had to be green and alive. She did not know, likely as not, that there was a stream running through the cove near their house. He would find it for her now.

Grasping his forked stick with either hand and turning its base up, he began to walk slowly about the yard. After a few minutes of searching here and there, he cried: 'Here it is, Ope! This stick's twistun the hide right offen my hands.' The depth to the water, he explained soberly, would be equal to the distance between the spot where the stick began to turn downward and the spot where it would be pointing straight at the earth. He asked her to stand where he was and to watch the stick go down against all the power of hell. He began to walk again, very slowly, and Opal saw the stick turning downward in his grasp.

'God a-mighty, it's twistun the bark right offen this stick! It's twistun the bark right off.'

'Well, don't hold it so tight. Don't hold the stick so tight, you big silly.'

'Don't be a plumb loonytick, Ope. I gotten hold it tight. That's the wrinkle what men don't know about.' He went perhaps twenty feet from where Opal stood and paused. 'The water's right here, Ope. It's a stream nigh as big as a river. Say, this old stick pulls liken a team of ox and there must be a river right under my feet as big as all get-out.'

While she stood on the spot he got a shovel and then he set a post. Water within twenty feet, he cried, and Opal, too, felt warmed by the discovery, her mind reaching out to its possibilities, to the time when she would have water running in her house and an orchard down the vale and a garden of flowers by her door. His place, Dock said, was probably the wettest in Antelope; and to learn whether he was right, he mounted a horse and rode away toward Lem Higley's. And when he returned, after many hours, weary and cold and eager, he said his guess had been right. There was no water on Lem's place. He had gone over it from end to end, from north to south and from east to west, and there was no water in a thousand feet, else his stick would have turned down. Nor was there any water on Hansie Hansen's or Bert Wynn's, because he had gone over them too.

'What did they think of you, ridun over their place like you was crazy?'

While Opal prepared supper he talked of new dreams that were quickly taking root in his being. He would search out wells for folk up here and for his service he would charge a moderate fee, perhaps fifty dollars for each well. Fifty dollars would be little to pay, little enough for men who otherwise would have to haul water all the days of their life from the foul Antelope Creek or from the river and up a long dugway. And in time, if he found many wells, there would be windmills here and there over this country and orchards, perhaps, and there might

be shade trees around houses and along lanes. There might even be flower gardens and lawns and fields of lucerne and clover. No one could say what there might not be. And if his place were the only one under which water flowed, he would put up more windmills than one and he would sell water to these people, cold clear water that reached down into the heart of earth.

In time Opal would have a house girl to help her with the work inside and he would have a hired man or two, or as many as he needed. She must not work outside in the fields as many wives did, as Ole Humbersum's did and many whom he knew. The fields were no proper place for a woman, not for a lovely woman at least, and Opal was a lovely woman. He didn't need a Lem Higley to tell him that. 'Lem says you're the most lovely woman he ever laid eyes on. He says he never see such eyes as them-there you got. He told me that right now when I was over there.' Dock came over to the stove and put an arm around her and kissed her hair. 'He talks too much, Ope. Some day I aim to put a shiverun ager in that man. He says he heared you a-whistlun one day and a missus what can whistle, he says, is the one for a man to have. A whistlun wife and a bunch a sheep is the very best thing a farmer can keep, he says.'

He had been thinking of a bunch of sheep, too, and he didn't need a Lem Higley to remind him. Over near Dry Canyon, among the deep ravines and on the hills, was a lot of land good only for

sheep pasture. It was land overgrown with small brush rich with leaves of the kind sheep liked. And he would have some cattle, a herd of milk cows, perhaps, and he would sell enough cream to buy all their food and clothes.

‘What made Lem say I was a beautiful woman? What was you talkun about to make him say a thing like that?’

He would buy a truck with which to haul their cream out and their eggs, because he intended to have three hundred hens, or even a thousand once he got his farm under way. They could keep their eggs in a cool cellar during the summer months; perhaps they could run a stream of cold water under their cases and they could sell them in the fall when eggs would be of decent price. That was the way his mother had always done and no one had ever found a bad egg among hers. They would sell them at different stores, in Rigby and Idaho Falls, because no merchant would buy twenty cases of eggs from a farmer at one time. Or perhaps they could ship them to Pocatello or to Salt Lake City. And later, after no great length of time, they would have an automobile and during the winters they would move out to a city and hire some one to take care of things here.

‘You don’t say why Lem Higley said that about me. You don’t say.’

They would put their children into school, if Opal wished. They might send them through high school, anyway, and that would be enough. A person with

a high school education was no fool. There was Danny Hart, now cashier of a bank, and he had never been to college. And there was Will Crudder, now manager of a Rigby lumber yard, and there was old Hill's son who had become a state senator. A high school education would be enough, all that any person ought to have and much more than was had by many great men of the world.

'I ain't heard you say yet. You don't say why Lem said that what you say he did.'

'How do I know why that man says things! His tongue runs liken a bell clapper. My mind would plumb wear out if I was to figger why that man says things. He says you're a burnette and he says good-lookun burnettes ain't common to say about. Ella Hansen, he says, is a blonde. What is there besides blondes and burnettes, do you know?'

'Why was he talkun about me? Something must a-brought me into your confab.'

'Ella Hansen has hair liken gold coin wheat. Old Con Wote was a-hangun around there liken he was waitun to make love. That's another man I aim to bust full a shiverun ager. He jipped me in a horse trade once. I traded a roan gilding, I remember, and he traded a brown mare with a spavin ——'

'Oh, shut up a while, will you?'

'Say, Ope, when did Lem Higley hear you whistlun? I ain't heared you whistle, not in the longest time God ever made.'

'I guess you expect a woman to whistle in this lonely place. Say right now what you expect.'

'I expect to knock the tar outen some guys around here.' Dock began to walk about the kitchen, looking fiercely at things, looking at his rough hands and through the window toward Lem's place. 'I aim to stand on my right from this-here day on. I'm sick and tired these men who think I'm plumb outen my mind.'

'Oh, for God sake, you silly! Set down, will you, and shut up your jawun.'

'That Hansie's a sight to smart a man's eyes, if I ever see one. Holdun his stomick and a-pukun at everything in sight. He ain't no man, that-air guy ain't. I'm to see the woman yet who could make me ——'

'Oh, in God's name! If you don't shut up I'll take the kid and run away right now. I get sick listenun to all you will do and you don't never do a thing but talk and talk!'

Dock set plow into his land and turned up dark unbroken furrows. The earth was black and wet and it stuck to the discs of his plow. Either too dry or too wet, he told Opal as he clawed the sticky soil away with his hands; the earth would always be like this, no matter to what far countries a man went. But he was eager and happy and full of triumph. His eyes would look back down the even furrows, over the quiet hills, up at a sky serenely blue, and he would say foolish things to her that only half expressed his gladness. The plow cut with smooth sharpness into the earth, the furrows lying

down behind with a low muffled sound through which came the quick cutting of old grass and of sagebrush and dry twigs. After finishing the piece he had grubbed, Dock again loaded his plow with stones and went into the uncleared fields. Sometimes the plow would rise from the earth and screech over a large patch of tough brush, of serviceberry or of scrub mahogany, or it would run swiftly round a huge bunch of wheat grass, pulling the horses over with it; but for the most part it kept firmly in the soil, cutting roots in two and turning tall sagebrush bottom up. The sod filled the air with a sweet smell, as if spring had lain under, and the blue of the sky deepened. Small breezes played over the hills, awaking new life, stirring old life from its long sleep. These were not the gray hot hills of last August or the cold white hills of December, but young hills now with spring coming fresh from their heart. The aspens were putting out tiny green leaves, wrinkled as if from long sleep, and small naked buds were coming out on the limbs of bushes. Lovely grass, sweet to smell, was covering the hillsides and in coves the amaranths were spreading green carpets. Out of the south came a few birds, a robin that hopped near Opal's door, and bluebirds so lovely and awake with song that her eyes blurred as she watched them. She would whistle a little while cooking meals or attending to her child, or she would leave it asleep and walk over the hills, her being starved for all the sweet loveliness everywhere.

Dock went to the valley for food and seed grain and for some chickens and pigs and a cow. The whole valley was moving up, he said; from end to end of Antelope, people were building houses or plowing land, strangers whom he had never seen, people whom he knew. Jim McHenry had taken a forty down by the creek, forty acres being all that remained of his homestead right, the other having been squandered on some Wyoming desert. Hank Terry was just beyond him, and near by was Jerry Ash, and a little farther still was Tim Avery. Jad Thurgenstowen had a hundred acres plowed and was plowing when Dock went by; and cursing, too, so loud that he could be heard a mile away. Opal wished she might see this dark giant with his fierce mustache who frightened people with his terrible oaths and his eyes full of rage. Up the creek way, not far from Hansie Hansen, were Andy Larson and Tod Asher, and south of Lem Higley was Joe Smith. She ought to see Joe Smith, that strong young man with a baby's tongue and his way of talking that would make a dog laugh. He was quite a fellow, Joe Smith, with his 'Dod dammit' and his 'Dis ting would make a man turse his dod till his wits busted.'

In the wheat to be planted were countless tiny black seeds which Dock said he ought to fan out. They might be weed seeds, pigweed, perhaps, though he thought pigweed was brown and larger; or perhaps they were thistles or wild mustard. Some farms in the valley were being overrun by weeds, and Bill Gorman, after failing to conquer them, had

turned his farm into a sheep pasture. Dock put the wheat in a formaldehyde solution and Opal helped him, placing two sticks across the tub when he drew the sack up or dipping her hands into the stinging water to help wet the grain. The sacks quickly swelled after being lifted out and Opal thought they would burst. The time was not right for planting, Dock said, because the moon was not full yet. Some planted wheat in the time of new moon, but grain sowed then never fully matured, the kernels being small and wrinkled and the stalks dwarfed. Oats did well in new moon, and in a dry year it was best to plant potatoes then and sugar beets. Did she know how long it would be until full moon? Of these little things, the ways of the moon and the signs for doctoring sheep and cattle, she ought to keep him informed, because he was busy with all the work one man could do. Jad Thurgestowen was planting his wheat now, but Jad was a crazy fellow who never did anything according to common sense. 'Them pigs I got is full-blooded poll and china,' he said. 'You can't buy no better pigs. And them hens is white leggarns, the most layun hens ever set on a roost. That-air old china boar weighed four hundred pounds, do you know it? And there wasn't a ounce a fat from his snout to his hinder.'

Did she know there was a strange old fool across the river who had been there for years and years? Across from Plateau Bottom, he was, hidden away in a little shack under the cliff. Where he came

from, nobody knew, nor why he was there alone and almost forgotten. Once in a long while he would go down the river in a boat and load it with provisions and pull it back up the river to his cabin. He seemed to have plenty of money, because he never did any work that a man knew of, except to raise a small garden and to roam over the mountains with his savage dog. Perhaps he had robbed a bank and hidden over there or perhaps he had run away from a bickering wife. 'God knows, I don't. Mebbe he's just a ornery fool and don't know where he is. He never speaks to a soul, Bill Gorman says, and when you speak to him, why, he looks wild at you liken a loonytick. I ain't figgered him out yet.' It was a strange world, he said, a queer world that would break a man's mind to pieces if he thought about it too often or too long. 'I'll tell you, Ope. God lets some people live old and some He don't. He lets a man live till he learns he's a plumb fool and then he dies. That's why some live old and some die young. I can see I won't live much longer.'

Opal deliberated this and said: 'You talk silly as anything. What about babies that die young?'

'Well, I can't say now. But I'll think about it and tell how it seems. I'll figger it out and tell you.'

When the plowing was done, Dock with a harrow dragged the sagebrush into long rows and burnt it. He was working fifteen hours in every day now, from dawn until dark. And after darkness came there

were things to be done: the cow to search for over the hills and to milk, stray chickens and pigs to be found, the horses to water and feed. The smoke of sagebrush fires rose in blue waves or in gray clouds, and some of it came over and filled the cove by the house. For many days there was a smell of burnt sagebrush in the air, more pungent in early morning. When the moon was full he sowed his grain, walking over the hills and broadcasting it from his hand. He then harrowed it under. From the doorway Opal could see him going back and forth over the hills, all day long, his right arm steadily swinging; or she could see him walking behind the harrow in a cloud of dust. His feet, she knew, whenever she thought of him, would be sinking ankle-deep into the soil, his face would be black with it and sweat would wash funny circles and lines of it around his mouth and eyes and down his neck. His eyelids would be red, his eyes bloodshot, and hard little ridges of earth would be on his teeth. His shirt would be stiff and foul when she washed it and his underwear would be black and stained. At noon or at night he would come in and sit upon the doorstep, take off his shoes and knock them against the house to empty their caked earth, take off his socks and rub them between his hands. And if she came over and looked down at him, she would see his scalp speckled with dirt and his hair matted with dirt and sweat. In the house, or outside when near him, she would smell the stink of his unclean body and the rank odor of his clothes. At night, when he lay be-

side her in his heavy winter underwear, she would smell him again and she would turn her face to the wall. And perhaps he would say, 'What's the matter, Ope? Don't you love me no more?' If she rebuked him for wearing thick underwear in summer time, he would begin to curse and to say unspeakable things of people who changed their clothes with the weather. The world was full of fools, he said, as alive with them as a carcass with bugs. If heavy clothes would keep out the cold, why, they would keep out the heat, as any man could see. 'I can't see it no other way, not if I figgered till all the angels fell outen the sky.'

Opal's days were crowded with unpleasant tasks that fretted her waning energy, now that her second child was soon to come. The hens were laying everywhere, among bushes, even in the mouths of badger holes. She would hear them cackling loudly, and would never know whether they had laid or whether they were being chased by weasels or hawks. The hogs were wallowing under the water-trough and splashing their muck into the cistern, or they were rooting huge holes by its side for cool places to sleep in. Opal would run after them until she was breathless and impotent with rage, hurl clods and chunks of firewood at them; but they would only trot serenely away and stop to look at her with cunning bright eyes. Their bodies were caked with mud and dripping with slime; there was mud hardened around their eyes and hanging to their lashes in small chunks that clicked when they walked. Of

the boar she was a little afraid because he opened his mouth at her and showed long yellow tusks.

In her house she would sit for an hour in silence and stare with remorseless eyes at all the ugliness in sight, at a burlap sack full of stinking clothes to be washed, at dirty dishes piled upon the table and stove, at the sagging bed in the other room with its burden of unclean quilts and with its scarred posts that were trying to fall; at the rough floor boards with their cracks growing wider as the boards shrank, and with their stains of grease, and at the roof where earth was sifting through. All these she was learning to hate with intensity that made her shudder. She was sick of little to eat but potatoes and milk gravy and bread. Often she looked in a mirror to see the loveliness of which Lem had spoken, and the more frequently she looked the less she saw of it. Already she seemed to be years older than when she came here. Many were the times when she felt a great tenderness for her husband, for the strength which he was spending upon these hills, for the little ways he had that women loved, for his enthusiasm and building of dreams; but at other times her loathing of him filled her with deathly sickness and she imagined she could have driven a knife into his heart while he slept. Her manner of living was becoming sharp and ugly, she realized in lucid moods, and day by day like a familiar thing, more potent with each remembrance, there came to her a vivid awareness of what she would be if she lived all her life here.

'I can't go on here,' she said one night while Dock was searching a calendar for promise of rain; and her tone made him look at her swiftly. Her eyes were turned away and there was a strange quivering in her body. 'I'm off to the river one of these days to throw myself in. If I ever meant anything in my whole life, I mean that.'

Dock laid the calendar aside and went to her, his hands eager, his eyes seeking hers. 'Now, Ope, this ain't no proper way for a woman to talk, no way in God's world.'

'I mean it,' said Opal, resisting him, fighting back the weakness of tears. 'I mean it, Dock, with all my heart.'

He put a strong arm around her waist and they went outside and walked slowly for a long while. Upon a hill he pointed to fifty acres of plowed land, already putting green life above the dark sod. He talked of their future and in his voice was a vibrant passion, a sense of undefeat, an unconquerable hope in the face of all the hells of earth, that called to her deepest love and found its answer. They had only got a good start, he said, and there would be no turning back. In his flesh and bone he felt a mighty strength that would break this stubborn country to his will and it was a strength that would awaken and grow with the years. Nature could not conquer him, not as long as he could raise an arm and swear an oath. He would plow the remaining land this summer and build the fence and next year they would have a hundred and fifty acres of wheat.

They would have a garden next year, when there would be less work to do; and he would dig the well soon. They were both young and strong and unconquered. There could never be a turning back now. . . .

Nearly every morning Dock went out early to look at his grain and he always came back with things to tell: of how thick it was or of its quick growing or of the wetness still in the earth. He would fetch a handful of soil to prove to her that it was still damp or he would bring a stalk of wheat to show how tall it had grown. And in Opal a wonder grew at his love for these things which she hated. As he built fence or plowed new land, he seemed to become for her a part of these, one with the hills and the sky.

Once she said to him, when his face and hands were black and his clothes full of dust: 'You seem like a chunk of earth grewed up. You just seem like a piece of ground grewed up on legs and movun around, that's all.' And when he answered with only a surprised stare, she went on: 'You seem to think them ugly hills is your kids or something. You seem just like a big chunk of them to me.'

'For God sake, Ope, what are you aimun to say?'

'I say, you seem to think them hills is your kids or something. You'll want to marry one of them hills. I'm mistook if you don't think all them hills is alive.'

'Why, of course them hills is alive, Ope! You don't think dead things grewed all them sagebrush, do you? Them hills is alive, Ope, though we mighten know just how.'

And he strove to make her feel, as he felt, the liveness of all things about him, of the hills and the clouds and even the mountains across the way. His mind groped for words that would make her understand the mystery of these, the deep living power of them, almost the intelligence of them. Between all these and himself, he admitted, there existed a kinship, something for which he could find no words, a feeling of love sometimes, or of fear and wonder. He had hardly thought of the matter before she mentioned it, but now that was the way it seemed to be.

'You'll want to marry one of them hills for the surest thing in life. It won't surprise me not a bit if you do. Or you'll want to marry one of them sagebrush or a quakun asp.'

Often she went with him to help a little in building fence, and she wondered again at his manner of handling the cedar posts and at the things he said. Every post seemed to be for him a friend whom he had known long ago. He set them upright before putting them in their holes and looked at them and told things about them. He remembered where he had cut this one down, right on a precipice, and he remembered the crash of it when it broke in falling. This one he had cut in a hollow and he had hated to, for it was the loveliest cedar he had ever seen grow-

ing. He spoke of a post as *him* and never as *it*, and likewise of his machinery and his fields and his grain. 'That grain's jumpun right up liken he was pushed by a man's hand.' 'That plow's a crackerjack, Ope. He's the best plow a man ever set on.' 'Looken that-air field a wheat, Ope. Was there ever a field liken him, do you know?' Sometimes things were males, sometimes females. The house and most of the things in it were females. 'That-air chair's about to lose one of her legs,' or, 'She's hot, that stove is.' And to most of the things outside he gave names, the names of men. His plow was Jim and his harrow was Bill and his water tank was Harry, named for the man from whom he had bought it. 'Jim throwed me far as a deer can jump to-day.' 'Bill sure yanked them sage right out liken they was not worth a tinker's damn.' He loved to hold earth in the clutch of his big brown hands and to explain to Opal that its dark color meant richness and value. There were a thousand crops of wheat waiting to be harvested from this soil, enough for him and his children and his children's children.

'There wasn't much dew this mornun and that means rain soon. That-air grain, he's a-beginnun to burn a little. I heared hooten owls last night, but I guess they ain't real hooten owls up here. What are they, mebbe, do you know? That was a wet moon and tipped up full a water.'

The well, which he would dig soon, was a female too.

'Why don't you dig that well you talk so much

about? You been talkun about it for weeks, but I don't see no well to speak of.'

'I'll dig her soon, Ope. Any day now. I aim to get a little fence up first. Say, do you know there'll be a thousand cattle up here soon? I'll dig her any day now.'

But the days passed and no well was dug. Opal imagined he was afraid there was no water to be found. 'You're afraid to dig it, that's all. You don't think there's any water.'

'Water! Why, God, woman, there's a whole river right under this house. That well will shoot out in a stream tall as a mountain. It might drown this whole country.'

And now, as always before when she spoke of the well, Dock searched the sky for signs of a coming storm. His grain was burning, the leaves near the ground fading to yellow and those higher on the stalks losing their fresh green. Twelve inches below the earth's surface there was moisture, but grain roots, for no reason clear to him, never went down that far. The roots of wheat grass did and of sagebrush and of everything else that did a man no earthly good. The calendar man said there would be rain ere long and the owls were noisy over by the river. Somewhere in the world, he supposed, there was wheat with longer roots and he would find it. He had never seen a moon so wet as this one. There was less dew every morning now, and when there would be no dew at all it would rain such a rain as Opal had never heard of.

One morning Dock came in eagerly to tell her that there had been no dew and that rain was coming, though when she looked out the sky was serenely clear. And to her surprise a rain came and it was such a rain as she had never seen before. On the next afternoon clouds came from behind the mountains and stretched their black bellies across the sky. Winds rose and hurried through them, turning them over and under, tearing them into long shreds that slanted earthward, rolling them down in dark tumbling masses until the mountains were lost to sight. High over head lightning threw lurid sheens among the clouds and thunder split and choked and went off in muffled roarings. Then up the river like a high gray wall came the breast of the storm. Winds came before as if clearing the way, gathering up clouds of dust and whirling them eastward, dislodging old tumbleweeds and chasing them like live things over the hills, and riding down upon bushes and grain and trees and almost crushing them flat against the earth. In the air there was a smell of water, of plowed fields, and of lightning, and thunderings came before the storm, flowing in waves of sound or piling in great crashes.

Shouting to Opal to look well to her house, Dock drove the frightened chickens into the barn and shut the door. The running wind was full of the smell of burnt sagebrush. Around the yard a hog was trotting and squealing; stopping for a few moments as if to sense his danger and then going swiftly with uncertain purpose. He followed Dock

to the door and when it closed against him, he sprang away with crazy twisting movements and vanished in a clump of bushes. When they looked out, the storm was almost upon them, slanting gray lines of rain running from sky to earth. For a few moments the ground was peppered with hail, the frozen bits bouncing and rolling and gathering into small white mounds. Then the rain struck and darkness closed around them. Streams of muddy water ran down the hills and soon they were swollen to small torrents that rushed in black waves. The air was cold and wet and sweet to smell.

Drops of water came through the roof and soon the drops gathered into lines. Down the aspen poles of the roof water ran in thin sheets and the earth of the roof was melted and washed in chunks to the floor. Dock made a roll of the bed and covered it with sacks. Opal strove to find a dry spot, taunting him the while with praise of the flower garden he would have on the roof, or of the tree he might plant there. Or she said unkind things of the well he would dig. 'If you'd dug your well and run a ditch to it you could fill it with water now. That's the only way you'll ever get a drop in it.'

Lightning flashed so near that everything in the room stood out sharply in its white light. Thunder came down in deafening crashes and the house shuddered. Brilliant light flooded the rooms, and Opal felt something swift run through her body and down her arms. An explosion of thunder seemed to come out of the very floor at her feet. The lightning

that time was very near, Dock said, as he searched for other things to be covered. He would not be surprised if it hit the barn or the horses or the plow. Water now poured in muddy streams upon the floor and disappeared in the wide cracks between the boards. Opal stood in a corner with Dick at her breast, the tarpaulin over her head and shoulders and some dry clothes for the child under her arm. She could hear the rain pattering upon the tarpaulin and she could feel its coolness against her flesh; and outside she could hear washings and gurglings under the even downpour of the storm. Perhaps the chickens would all be drowned, Dock said, and the stable would be knee-deep of muck. But this was the rain he had prayed for, and little he cared if it washed everything away but his horses and his grain. His wheat would make forty bushels now, or fifty, and he could break new ground and dig his well. There would be new grass for his horses and the cow. He wished God might wash his house away, off the hills and into the river; then he would build another, one with a tighter roof and floor and one with three rooms.

Opal stood silent in the corner, listening to him, his voice coming indistinctly above undertones of rain on the floor and the storm outside. Water was running down his face from his matted hair, and his shoulders and arms were wet. She watched him put bread and sugar and salt into the oven and put the flour on a chair with the table turned over it. The roar of the storm was chipped into by the hungry

gurgle of streams near the house or it was brushed by the wet waving of bushes in the wind or it was split open by thunder that now rolled away far overhead. Dock was talking all the while, seeming never to come to the end of things that interested him. She could see him shivering as he worked and could hear a few words broken over his chattering teeth. He was telling her that the calendar man was not a fool after all; that all the chickens would be drowned like rats in a hole; that he could now dig post holes and his well.

On and on he talked of what he would do, trembling with cold and striving to keep things dry. He seemed stranger than usual now, cold and drenched, a great storm blindly gutting the earth outside, he serenely herding among his dreams. In the air was a sweet smell of wet earth and of the fragrance of wild flowers and green things. Dock went outside to have a look at the chickens. The winds were dying, Opal thought, because she could no longer feel a shuddering in the logs by her and the rain was falling in an even roar. They would sleep in wet bedding in a wet cold house, and all night the rain would fall and it would bring in a gray dawn. All night the water would run through upon the tarpaulin over them and the earth of the roof would drop in chunks of mud upon the floor. . . .

A black night came and the rain steadily fell. The chickens were all right, Dock said, returning with an armful of wet wood and striving to make a fire. They were all soaked to their hides and their

feathers parted in matted bunches to show their flesh, but they were alive still and able to move about. They would all be dead before morning, though, if the rain fell night-long as it was falling now. The pigs had been washed clean and were out on the hills grubbing for roots and worms. Angle-worms were wriggling everywhere outside and they made excellent pig feed, though no man would ever have thought it. 'I guess your garden's all washed off of the roof, ain't it?' Through the gloom she could see him stooping to blow into the stove.

He went outside again, and soon she heard him walking upon the roof and she saw clinging bunches of dark earth tremble and then fall as he walked over them. When he returned, his hands and knees were covered with mud. He had spread his horse blankets upon the roof above the stove and ere long now he would have a dry spot for her and a warm supper. And as Opal watched him busy with things in the wet darkness, she wondered at his dauntless way in the face of a pitiless nature that crushed completely her will to live. 'You'd better not go outside no more or you'll fall in that well you dug.'

The fire was blazing now, and she could sometimes see his face in its light or she could make out what he was doing. His clothes dripped water and water squashed in his shoes, but on his face was the same look she had seen there when he grubbed brush or plowed or gazed over these hills last year when drouth had eaten into their heart. 'Did you hear me say not to fall in that well?' From the

stove came the odor of coffee and little waves of heat were reaching out and warming her face. He was mixing batter in a pan, a coating of mud drying and turning white on his hands.

It was a pity, he said, that she never knew his father, old Joe Hunter, the first pioneer to settle in Snake River Valley. There was a man for a person to think about as long as he would. Had she heard the legends about him, of his days in Nebraska with Buffalo Bill, of his lone fight with the grizzly bear, of the seventeen notches on his rifle for Indians he had slain, of his shotgun duel with old Ham Perkin? These were such tales as no other man could tell. Ham was a sneak thief, that was all.

'He stole my old man's deer what he hid in a snowpile. And when he lied about it, liken the lousy dog he was, my old man told him to fight a duel or he'd blow his guts all over a half acre. They fit with shotguns, them two did, and I guess it must a-been some fight from all I've heared. Where in hell's name is your bakun powder, Ope? . . . Well, them two entered a cottonwood patch. One entered on one side and one on the other. They was to shoot at sight. My old man see him first and blowed a hole in him a skunk could a-crawled through. In the jerk of a dead lamb's tail I'll have a supper to make your mouth water. . . . Wish you could a-seen my old man, Ope. You would a-liked my old man.'

The lids of the stove were red-hot and waves of delicious warmth were flowing over to Opal and around her, releasing her aching body from the wet

and the cold. And deep within her was stirring a new warmth for Dock or an old warmth waking to new life. She felt an impulse to go over and kiss his muddy hands, to wipe the mud and water from his face, to take off his clothes and dry them, to kiss his mouth. The room was full of the odor of coffee and from the oven came the smell of warm bread. In her heart was new love and there was new understanding in her mind. Dock held a chair above the open flame to dry its seat, and after a little Opal came over and sat by the fire.

Through her drowsy recognition of security and warmth and Dock's preparation of something to eat came his words again, telling again of the exploits of his father. She watched the movements of his hands or the expressions of his face and understood now and then a little of what he was saying. His father had been like no other man in the wide world. He had thrust a club down the bear's throat and had beaten its brains out with a boulder. . . . Perhaps he had told her this story before, or had he? Outside Opal could hear the even pour of the rain and the gurgle of running water or thunder far away. Once his father had fought a terrible battle with a bull moose from which he had shot two legs off. Once he had lived for six weeks on the hides of coyotes which had died of starvation. Only hides and bones were left and he boiled the hides and ate them. Opal smiled and wondered why Dock spoke so often of his father and of things that his father had done. He had been a great giant, perhaps, with enormous

shoulders and hands and a long beard. Dock had powerful shoulders, too, and large strong hands, but his legs and hips were small.

From the floor near the stove steam was rising in clouds and earth of the roof above the stove was turning gray, like the gray of the hills had been before the rain came. Tiny chunks of earth fell upon the hot stove and burned brown. Dock gave her a cup of coffee and a warm fragrant biscuit spread with cream; and then he brought the bed and laid it upon the floor. He warmed the quilts and clothes for the child and with gentle hands undressed him. After Opal had crawled in between warm covers and cuddled the child against her breast, Dock dried his own garments, taking off one and then another and holding them to the heat. He was talking again, not of his father now, but of things he would do before his grain ripened. Opal sleepily watched him, standing by the stove now in his underclothes, turning round and round to give them the heat. She could see yellow sweat stains and she could faintly smell their foul steam as they dried. But she cared little now for these things. She wished he might come quickly to bed because she wanted to kiss him and to lay her head in sleep close by his. Spoken words mingled in her mind with the churn of the storm, meaningless sounds, flowing away in the night, lost with the darkness and the rain.

The sun rose clear in a sky of deepest blue. The earth was wet and sweet and a sweet fragrance

filled the morning and entered the damp muddy house. Opal put on a coat and went among the chokeberry bushes, loaded with showers of white blossoms, drops of rain hanging like crystals along their boughs or dripping from their washed leaves. She buried her face in clusters of wet blossoms and felt their fresh coolness on her hands and arms, or she breathed their cool fragrance and looked at their white loveliness against the blue of a far sky. Down on the river wild gooseberries and currants would be ripe now, and later there would be a few wild raspberries and a few huckleberries if the frost did not kill them. Inside, Dock was getting breakfast and cleaning the house. He was washing mud from the floor, scouring streaks of stain from the stove, and moving wet things out into the sun. She could hear him singing in a loud tuneless voice while he worked, silly songs that she had never heard before.

My Bess she was the gal for me,
My Bess she knowed no sin,
For when God let a devil out
She let a angel in,
Oh she let a angel in!

Opal whispered the words to herself, wondering at their meaning as it awakened in her mind. His voice was pitching loud against the walls, filling the house with echoes, and coming in a burst of freedom through the open door. It was a strange voice in its new volume of sound, shouting hoarsely at fresh visions of conquest or striving to modulate its triumph to soft tones and harmonies.

This is the farm for me, I says,
This is the farm for us, says she,
And by God's will we'll work until
This place is lovely as can be!

She could hear him scraping the stove or she could hear his heavy shoes on the wet boards as he moved from one task to another. Gathering a handful of drenched blossoms she went quietly to the house and listened. He was talking to Dick now, saying silly things to him or telling him of things waiting to be done. Perhaps Dick could hike out and dig the well, a little each morning before breakfast; or perhaps he'd rather break new sod while his father dug it. One or the two, it made no difference. It was a shame for a big fellow like Dick to be lying abed when the sun was up, snoring for dear life, or playing with his toes and counting his thumbs. There was a pair of overalls in the corner and he might as well put them on and stretch himself to a man's height. There was little need for him to take twenty years to grow up. A colt was a full-grown horse in three years and some heifers were mothers at two; and a dog was a grandfather at Dick's age. 'Get outen there, Dick, and make yourself to some account. You act liken a plumb daft kid and all this melancholy won't get you far as a toad can jump. Your mother is melancholy somewheres now, and what good will it do her, do you know? Your old dad gets blue sometimes, but he don't let nobody know, for that would do no good to say about. No good, Dick, in the wide world. Come on outen bed, I say. Get

in them-there coveralls and stop your melancholy, Dick, for it ain't no use. Dig that-air well while I build fence, will you? Dick, let me hear you say a word.'

And suddenly Dock's voice burst again into tuneless song.

And do you love me, dear, she says,
I love you, dear, says I;
I'll love you long as them stars shine
And rivers all run dry.

Oh, this is the farm for me, I says,
Oh, this is the farm for us, says she . . .

Opal entered softly and laid her flowers on the table. She looked at Dick, but he was sound asleep.

'Who you been talkun to? I thought I heard you talkun to some one.'

Several moments passed before Dock answered. 'I was talkun to that lazy kid a ourn. I was tellun him to get out and do something for to earn his board and keep.' He stopped when he saw the blossoms she had gathered. 'God a-mighty, Ope, what are you spoilun our orchard for! Don't you know them bushes is our orchard and that pickun blossoms will kill their fruit? You mighten show a little sense once in all your life-long.'

Opal reddened, and for her all the sweetness went out of the morning. She found herself again among the ugly things she hated — a rain-soaked house and mice and rats and pigs and a cistern with dead things in it. She gathered the blossoms and threw

them out into the mud of the dooryard. 'Who was that Bess woman you was shoutun your lungs out at, you might say?' Tears were in her eyes when Dock looked at her, but behind the tears were the bright fire of anger and the darkness of hatred.

'I didn't mean a thing, Ope. I spoke too sharp, I guess. Honest to God, Ope, I didn't mean a thing.' He came over to her, his eyes asking forgiveness, but she pushed him away and went outside.

Bitter rage and loneliness were choking her, pushing her heart down into the hard lump that it must become if she remained here. The blue sky mocked her now and the showers of blossoms and all the wet sweet things of the hills. Going behind a bush she wept and moaned at the pain reaching through her being, at the sharp ache of something imprisoned in her breast, pushing out vainly to new life and dying there as it had been dying now for a long year.

V

ONE morning Dock brought his shovel into the house and while he screeched with a file back and forth across its edge he announced that the well would now be dug. His surface demeanor now, as always when he spoke of this matter, was one of certainty that water was to be found, but under his manner there seemed to be a deep and reticent doubt. His flow of words, Opal vaguely surmised, was a mask behind which he hid disbelief. Joe Smith was coming over to help him and in return Dock would explore Joe's place for water. Joe would get fifty dollars for one day's work, Dock said, pausing to stare at Opal, because fifty dollars would be the price that other men must pay. Fifty dollars would be dirt cheap for such service. If he located a hundred wells he would make five thousand dollars, and with that sum he could buy a new house and many other things of which he had not had time to think. He had intended to invite Lem Higley instead of Joe, but he was sick and tired of Lem's chin music. There was a man to give anybody a headache, talking endlessly of stars and politics and philosophy and God alone knew of how many other things in which a sane man could find no interest. He thought years ago that Lem had good sense, but he was sure now that the fellow had a cracked brain.

Dock said his wheat was burning again and it was

being choked to death by millions of weeds. What the weeds were he did not know: he would have to see their blossoms. Why God had made weeds to overrun a man's crop was another matter for which there could be no answer worth listening to. He had heard Hansie say that God looks down upon men and chooses a small number for future leaders, for arch-angels or something in the next world, and upon these few were sent sore afflictions to test their spirits. Hansie said God had chosen him and was now measuring his worth by giving him stomach trouble. But he was a plumb fool, Dock declared, again pausing to look at Opal. He just sat around in pious helplessness, thinking of what he would be after he was dead. And his wife, day and night, was chasing other men to beat the band. 'He's the biggest fool I ever see in all my life-long.' Hansie's brother, Andy, had come up to run the place, and while he worked like a dog in the fields, Hansie sat in the house drinking coffee and reading the story of Job. 'Saint Peter will kick that belly-achun fool down to hell, or I miss my guess. If he's to be a arch-angel in heaven, why, I'm not aimun to stay there very long.'

Opal sat in the shade of a bush and watched him work. He directed a constant flow of talk at her, talk of the earth he was digging, of its increasing wetness as he dug deeper and deeper, or talk of Hansie and of Ella, his wife.

Joe Smith came over at noon and looked down at Dock's head, now level with the ground. 'Dod

thake,' he said when he saw Opal. 'Hello dare. I never thaw you till right thith minute, I never did.'

'Hello,' said Opal, and her eyes searched the six feet of him. He was a strong fellow with a smile that she liked and a way of saying things that filled her with delicious mirth. Her mind reached back to childhood people and ways and to a neighbor's boy who could never talk plain. She remembered: 'Don't say pace. Say pl—lace. Say, all this brat needs to make him talk plain is a hell of a thumpun . . .'

Above the well Joe erected three poles with a pulley attached and drew the earth up in buckets. Out of the ground Opal could hear Dock's voice, beating at the sides of the well, coming up in muffled, meaningless noise. Joe was talking of Lem Higley, and Opal supposed that the two of them were raking Lem over hot coals.

From Joe she heard: 'You thun of a bits, I thed to him. I thed you'd better not teal my bacon adin. I thed you're the turvieth dog ever tole a man's bacon right under hith eye. I thed you'd make a man turth hith Dod till hith wit buthted.' Then from the well would come the small, muffled thunder of Dock's abuse and after it would come again Joe's inimitable cursing.

And while listening to them Opal fell to wondering again about Dock and his strange ways. The next time Lem came over, she knew, Dock would greet him as a friend and have him in to eat and he would talk with him for hours. And when Lem went homie, Dock would probably say that he was sick and tired

of that man's chin music. He would say that Lem could talk the leg off a mule. It seemed to be Dock's incredible way to talk meanly of people behind their backs, even of people whom he liked, and to give them the best he had when they came to see him. 'If that-air Lem comes to get my plow, why, he won't get it,' Dock had once said; but when Lem came for the plow he got it, and upon his going, Dock said: 'If you need my tank or anything, Lem, why, just come and help yourself.' And after Lem had gone he said to Opal: 'That guy ain't nothun but a low bum. Does he think I'm a-buyun machinery for him, do you know? Next time I'll tell him to buy his own stuff. God a-mighty.'

'We're dittun damn near water,' Joe announced to her, and she went over and looked down the white clay walls of the well. When she knelt close by its brink to see more clearly, she could feel the coolness of the earth and she could smell its freshness. Almost twenty feet below, Dock was shoveling dirt into a bucket and talking up at Joe meanwhile. If water were to burst up suddenly, he said, he might be drowned like a rat in a hole for all he could do. He might be shot sky-high and dropped a mile away. After the bucketful came up, he fell upon his hands and knees and listened, and then shouted up to them that he could hear a terrible roaring as of a mighty river. 'I tan't hear a Dod damn thound up here,' said Joe, and stretched himself head downward so far into the well that Opal thought he would fall. Water would soon spout up, Dock assured

them, and he began to dig with feverish haste. From time to time he would put his ear to the bottom and listen or he would dig a smaller hole in one corner. After a while Joe thrust a long aspen pole into the well and drew the pole out and measured it. The well, he announced to Dock, was now twenty-seven feet deep.

'Twenty-seven feet!' roared Dock, looking up at him. 'Why, I wasn't to a-gone more than twenty feet right here for water. Now what is wrong, do you know?'

Joe sat upon a pile of soft earth and rolled a cigarette, grinning dubiously at Opal or peering over the brink at Dock. 'Dod damn,' he said, and leaned far back while he explored his pockets for a match. 'I deth dare ain't no water, Dock!' he cried, and looked over the hills to where his own farm lay in broad acres of sagebrush and drouth.

Dock told Joe to fasten the rope to the poles and then he came hand over hand out of the well. His eyes did not meet Opal's or Joe's, but looked away at the hills and up at the sky. 'But I can hear water down there, Joe. I can hear a roar like a river, I tell you.' His voice was so vibrant with deep disappointment, with something that was tearing a great hope out of his being, that Opal trembled and almost cried his name. She looked at Joe, wishing he might find some word of courage, but he was smoking grimly and staring at the sky.

Suddenly Joe threw his cigarette away and stood up in new resolve. He said he would blindfold Dock

and learn what reason there was in this method. Perhaps there was no truth in this way of searching out water with a forked stick, no truth at all. They would see. Over Dock's meek protest Joe blindfolded him and gave him a fresh serviceberry and led him away. To Opal he whispered that he would lead Dock around in circles for a while to confuse his sense of direction and to make certain this matter of finding water. He led Dock around and around upon a hill and then he took him westward from the well. Joe told him there was no water near them, but asked him to have his stick ready because he might discover water anywhere. And then the wily Joe led him back and forth by the well, around the well, and led him up to the well from all directions. Then he took Dock a hundred yards away, and told him that they were now approaching the well-stream which he had found.

'And she's a-beginnun to turn, just liken I said!' cried Dock excitedly. 'It's twistun the bark right offen this-here stick.' Joe led him very slowly, telling him to be sure, telling him to hold the stick from turning if he could. 'God a-mighty hisself couldn't hold this stick, Joe! It's takun the skin right offen my hands.' Joe said he would mark the spot and asked Opal to put something there. Then he led Dock in circles again, southward, northward, and took him far from the spot which Opal had marked. He told Dock they were again drawing near the spot where his stick had turned down and asked him to be sharply alert. Slowly Dock's stick began to turn

and when it was pointing at the earth, Joe removed the blindfold.

'Dod damn your tick,' he said, and made another cigarette. He explained what had happened, and by turns Dock stared at him and at the serviceberry in his hands. 'I led you all around dat well and your tick never wiggled.'

'Looken the bark on that stick!' cried Dock, and it was true that a part of the bark had been twisted off in his hands. 'What do you think of that?'

Joe stretched his powerful arms skyward. 'I don't know, Dock, what to tink.'

Late July turned Dock's fields to yellow, but it was not the yellow of ripe wheat. It was the color of millions of wild mustard blossoms and he knew now what the small black seeds had been in the grain he had sown. Shorter than the mustards and hidden from sight was the wheat, putting forth small heads, struggling upward to air and sunlight, its stalks near the earth burned brown and its lower leaves burned yellow. Dock went every day to his grain, and he would dig into the earth to see how far its moisture had sunk or search the sky for signs of rain or crush a head of wheat in his hands to learn if its kernels were shrinking. Sometimes after these things were done, he would sit on a hill overlooking his wheat and watch the yellow of the mustards flowing in waves under a wind. He had become more silent of late, and after building fence from morning until dark he would haul a tank of water

and crawl wearily into bed without speaking a word. From the cistern now came a foul smell and when Opal removed a board and looked into its dark depth she could see dead things resting in its water, mice and squirrels and a mountain rat, or she could sometimes see live things there, a toad striving to climb the cold cement walls or a squirrel swimming slowly round and round and coming at last to quiet rest. After dreaming many nights of these things struggling there in their dark wet hole of death, she would go daily with a bucket and fish squirrels and mice out, both dead and alive, and the live ones she would turn over and over in the sun until they dried and were able to run away. Not even the mice would she kill from the well, although her house was overrun with them and stunk of them. They gnawed into her flour and sugar, ate holes into her bread, and built their nests among her boxes and clothes. But these gasping ones taken from the cistern seemed to be different somehow, nearer in sympathy because they had been nearer death, and she was glad to see them run away among bushes or down holes. She drew up an enormous toad and fenced him in on her window sill and she would often watch him catch flies. She named him Flycatcher, and he came to be one of the warmest intimacies of her lonely life. Often she would take him upon her lap and he would look at her with dull eyes and puff out his huge chest, and sometimes she would let Dick put his hand on the toad's back or gently pull one of his legs.

'Looken that kid flirtun that toad around!' Dock

cried one day. 'He'll have warts on him thickern freckles.'

But toads, Opal told him, never caused warts; she had handled them all her life.

'Toads and frogs causes warts, Ope, and he'll be a mass a warts afore he's done. He'll be a sight to look at.'

Since the terrible rain of late June, Opal had made no effort to keep her house clean. She no longer scrubbed the floors or washed the windows. Dock had thrown more earth upon the roof, but from holes made by the rain dirt sifted down or now and then ran in fine streams and the walls were streaked with brown and yellow stains. From the east gable large rats peered at her with sharp eyes, and often at night she was awakened by the sound of their hard tails beating along the floor. From boxes Dock would take nests of baby mice to the barn, and hens would pounce upon the naked writhing little things and swallow them or they would peck at them until they lay still or the pigs would come over and eat them. Their excited mother would run here and there, her body visibly trembling, or from under the stable she would look out with bright terrified eyes.

Opal often wondered at the unperturbed ease with which Dock slew things: these mice which he crushed under his heel if neither the chickens nor the pigs wanted them, squirrels which he washed from their holes with the foul cistern water, the pup which now lay over the hill in a tiny grave. 'Watch them-there squirrels,' he would say to Opal as he poured water

down their holes. And after a little a squirrel, almost drowned, would come out and try to run away and Dock with a club would stretch it quivering on the earth.

All these things, except the pup, he slew when he was calm, but one day she saw him murder while in the most terrible rage she had ever seen. When he entered the house, clamoring for his shotgun, his face was ghastly white and there was the froth of madness on his lips. His eyes were small volcanoes of wrath. Cursing horribly, he seized his gun and went swiftly over a hill and Opal followed him, believing that he was going to murder Lem Higley or Hansie Hansen. But when she gained the hilltop, she saw some cattle in his wheat and knew that they had again broken through his fence. She could hear his loud oaths, unintelligible with fury, and gasping and stumbling she ran after him, calling his name. As he approached, one of the animals ran farther into the wheat and Dock leveled his gun and fired. At first, Opal thought he had missed and she moaned with relief, because the beast turned quickly about and came back to the herd; but in a few moments it staggered and fell and she could see it struggling to rise. When she reached Dock, he had cut its throat and was standing over it with a bloody knife in his hand.

'Now you're in a mess!' cried Opal, shrinking from the gurgling blood. 'You'll go to jail for this, you big fool!'

'Jail and be damned!' roared Dock, but the rage

had gone from his voice and in his eyes was a look of guilt and waking shame. 'I'll shoot every bastard busts through my fence, I will, and I'll shoot the man that opens his dirty mouth at me!' He began to curse again, striving, Opal surmised, to hide his shame and to intimidate her rebuke. The owners of these beasts he was calling foul names and he was repeating his threat to shoot the entire herd. 'I aim to skin it and eat it or I'll swivel up for the fool I am! I won't be walked on liken I was dirt by them valley guys and I'll break their jaws without they keep their dirty mouths shut!' He was talking on and on in his terrible way, telling of frightful things he would do, swearing curses upon every man in the world who owned breachy cattle. Sick at heart, Opal turned toward the house. She called back and told him that if he brought the beast to the house she would throw its flesh in his face.

The fencing was done and Dock was waiting for his wheat to ripen. August had come again, and it was like the hot arid month of a year ago. Squirrels had eaten a wide margin around the wheat; in the sky hawks were circling again, turning their cruel heads and searching the earth with sharp eyes; and before her grasshoppers moved in armies when Opal walked upon the hills. She sometimes drove her hens out to feed them where locusts were thickest and watched them eat gluttonously until their craws hung from their necks in large bunches. These the chickens ate and they would scratch among horse

dung, searching for weed seeds, and they would gobble up the mucus that Dock spit out. Opal could no longer eat their eggs and she wanted never again to eat their flesh.

Dock seldom spoke to her now. He had brought to the house some flesh of the steer he had shot, and Opal had thrown it to the pigs. The remainder of the beast he had buried out where it lay. The grass was brown and dry and his horses were getting poor and he could not keep his plow in the hard earth. The calendar man had promised a heavy rain on July thirty-first, but the rain had not come, and Dock with an oath had kicked the calendar into the well. It was into the well that he threw all things which offended him: a stinking dishrag, a comb he had broken while striving to untangle his matted hair, a flyblown loaf of bread that had smelt strongly of bacon grease. And when he spoke now it was nearly always with an oath, with a new and more terrible oath or with an old one to which he had become partial. Everything under the sun was Christ-killing now, and this oath at last brought a protest from Opal. His answer was vigorous and final. 'It's a Christ-killun race!' he roared at her. 'Ain't that what the race done, killed Christ? Read your Bible, woman, afore you start to say about things!' And for many minutes he seemed to be thoughtfully considering this new revelation of meaning. 'That's all the race is and not another thing in the world,' he declared and strode from the house.

Opal guessed out of what his more irascible temper

had grown. He was struggling to keep his dream, she knew, his dream of fields of golden wheat, and he was fighting against overwhelming odds. The wild mustards had ripened ere the grain and from their long dry pods the winds were scattering thousands of tiny black seeds over the ground. Next year would be no different from this one, and again the wheat fields would be heavy with yellow blossoms. His horses were becoming poor in spite of all he could do, and the sight of lean horses filled him with agony and rage. Squirrels were cutting his wheat down and poisoned oats did not seem to diminish their number, though everywhere they lay bloated and dead. He had drawn the water and its dead things from the cistern and had filled it again, but only the hogs and chickens would drink its water now. The dirty house and his 'melancholy' child sickened him, Opal knew well, and she strove a little to make the house tidy and to teach Dick to talk. Once she saw him, when he thought he was unobserved, going with his forked stick about the yard searching again for water; and she saw him stand for a while in thought and then look quickly around to see if he were being watched. All these things oppressed him, all these were driving him beaten to the earth, and in Opal's heart awakened a great sympathy, though she kept a firm hope that he would soon leave this country and seek a farm elsewhere. But Dock was not beaten yet, she realized in lucid moments, and against her will she responded to his grim and savage energy. The hard set of his mouth,

the ugly look in his eyes, his gnarled, hungry hands and the forward lurch of his powerful shoulders, these were all clear signs of his unconquerable spirit. She knew he would never yield, and she shuddered at a thought of what awaited them. Year after year of barren effort, springtimes of promise, of wild flowers and tall grass and rains, and summers of drouth and locusts and hawks. And as she thought of Dock and his ways, it seemed clear to her that he was pitting himself against a vast power, an unseen and ruthless power hidden in these hills and reflected in the passionless gray of this sky. Everywhere she looked there was something unfriendly and pitiless and hard, an unyielding force that would slowly crush them both to its will. This was to be the dream of a lone man's struggle against a power that was sinister and mighty and dimly seen. And when she thought of the matter in this way she felt her pulse quicken and felt blood like fire in her heart and along her veins. She wanted somehow to throw herself with Dock into the fight, to help him break these arid hills, to help him win under the pitiless glare of this hot sky. But such moods quickly passed and she would seem more impotent than before, more at the mercy of the power that brooded around her. Dock would go on and fight until he conquered or was conquered, but she could never share the savage, eager courage that was his. In her there would be a dying hunger, something reaching through her being and turning her cold, something spreading through her life and her thoughts and her

dreams like dust in waves of dry heat that would have no power to warm.

Sometimes when Dock was out on the hills, she would sit where she could watch him and she would wonder at what she saw. For she would see, with an acuteness unfamiliar to her, a thing small and alone moving out there, a tiny thing on a great gray breast and under a wide solitude that knew no sound but the sound of hawks and mighty winds and the sweep of mighty storms. Above him was the great wakeful loneliness of the sky, limitless and gray, and under him were the rolling dry hills with their mask of death or of gray life that was like death, and around him were mountains that walled him in. Out there he was digging tiny holes into this huge dead breast or he was scarring its surface with tiny furrows, and above and around him loomed an awful power, unseen but felt, that mocked his labor or with effortless will spread sickness over these things that he loved and strove to make grow. And it seemed absurd and pathetic that a man should set his puny might against the boundless power of this earth and this sky. This part of the world God had made a refuge for dry and unwanted things, for sagebrush and greasewood and tumbleweeds. Gardens and orchards and fields of grain were never meant to grow here, and it was madness to dream while here of the lovely things of valleys and streams. But Dock would never yield, and he would measure larger efforts against new defeats. Between him and these things it was a fight now that would run far into old age and perhaps into death.

When the wheat was swiftly ripening, Dock took Opal to her mother's in the valley and returned alone to his harvest. Three weeks later she rode up with Joe Smith and found Dock, more dirty and thin than she had ever seen him, sitting on the doorstep with his head in his arms.

'Look, dear,' Opal quavered. 'We have two this time.'

Dock rose in astonishment and stared. 'I'm a-lookun, ain't I! What do you mean to run off and have two kids?'

Opal went inside and Joe followed with Dick in his arms. 'Dod thake,' said Joe. 'Ain't tids what you want, man? Dit them all at once and be done with tid-raisun.'

In the wan light of a dirty lamp Dock looked down at the twins. 'Both girls or I'm a-flirtun lies around to beat all get-out. They look liken two worseless girls to me.'

'One dirl and one boy,' said Joe. 'And Dod blither me if I'n tell them separate. Dey look like two dirls or two boys, whatever you want most.'

'When was them kids borned?' asked Dock and groped for a calendar. 'I ain't wantun no more melancholy brats, not in a thousand years. And that's all them-there'll be or I'm not in my right mind.' He found a calendar and came over by the light. After a little searching he looked hard at Opal and demanded: 'Was them kids borned after midnight? If they was, then they're both in October. God a-mighty!'

And when Opal assured him that they had been born on the afternoon of the twenty-first he drew a great breath of relief and looked at them with more interest.

‘Which is the boy and which is the girl?’

Opal lifted their arms, for on the wrist of the girl she had put a tiny old bracelet.

‘This is the boy, then,’ said Dock and took the babe in his arms. ‘His name’s Bill.’

‘William, you mean,’ said Joe, who was warming himself by the stove.

‘Bill, I said. Your name’s Joe, ain’t it?’

‘Dod, no. People tall me Doe, but my name’s Doseph. What you named the dirl?’

‘Emerald,’ said Opal. ‘Her name’s Emerald.’ And after a little thought she added: ‘But I think they should have names alike. We could call them Ross and Rose or Violet and Victor or Frances and Francis ——’

‘Francis!’ cried Dock, who was reading the September horoscope. ‘You sure got Francis on your mind. His name’s Bill, and you call the girl what you like. . . . It says that-air kid has a spirit of e-q-u-i-t-y, and it says he has a strong will and he ain’t slow to quiet down when he’s mad. He ain’t easy f-a-t-h-o-m-e-d. What does that mean, do you know? And he’ll make wealth from many fields. It don’t say he will have any diseases a-tall, though he mighten got a weak liver from his dad. What month was you borned in?’ he asked, looking over at Joe. Joe said he was born in June. June eleventh, he

added. 'It couldn't a-been June,' said Dock, after reading for a few moments. 'It says them will have inventive genius and what did you ever invent to say about?'

'Inwent?' asked Joe. 'Did it tell I would inwent someting?'

'And it says June people is easy of speech and June sure ain't your month without that's a lie. And it says you have a taste for fine arts ——'

'Mebbe I'll inwent someting yet, now that I tink about it. Mebbe I will, Dock.'

'And it says you have a weak heart. You'll drop plumb dead one of these-here days, drop right offen your plow and lay there with your face in the dust. You'd best stop drinkun all that coffee or you'll be dead afore you know it.'

'I did inwent someting when a tid ——'

'It says you're honest and noble-hearted and that you oughten marry a woman borned in March or December. . . . A November woman, it says.'

'Nowember? Let me tink a minute, Dock.'

Opal went into the bedroom and made a little bed for Dick on two chairs. She filled his bottle with milk and placed it on his pillow with the nipple in his mouth. Long after she was in bed, she could hear Dock and Joe talking in the other room or she could hear one of them make up the fire or spit into the stove. Dock had not kissed her, and time and again she awoke from half-sleep to a brooding memory of his neglect. Perhaps he had been flirting with Ella Hansen or with other women up here; or perhaps his

love was already dead, dead like the yellow aspen leaves and the many things outside that took up their graves and fled before cold winds. She reached over and drew the nipple from Dick's sleeping mouth and tucked the covers around him.

In the October nights hung a round cool moon and upon the hard hills each morning was laid a sheet of frost. Behind the barn Dock's grain was piled in new-smelling sacks, three hundred and eighty bushels with the toll withdrawn. He had planted forty acres of winter wheat and above the frozen earth now its slender leaves each morning were sheathed with ice, but by noon they were again soft and green. A small wind with a sharp edge blew in the mornings; during the day it was warmed to a gentle motion and by sunset its edge was again sharp and cold. Dock said he would haul his grain out, and Opal asked if she might go with him to have the children baptized and blessed. But he said no. He could bless his own children as well as any other man could, and baptism, if he read the Bible in his right mind, was for the washing away of sins and the time to wash away sins was just before death. It was a waste of God's mercy to baptize babes.

In Opal's eyes a dull fire awoke and lived for many days. It was kindled anew when she learned that Ella Hansen had come over to cook for Dock's threshers and that she had slept here twice.

'So that's why you was so nice about lettun me move down this year! Last year you said there

wasn't no sense in a doctor, and this year you changed your mind clear around. So that was why, was it?'

Dock stared at her with his large pale eyes and Opal looked back with such jealous rage in her dark ones that he visibly shrank. 'Don't be a fool, Ope. You couldn't expect me to cook for all them-there men ——'

'So that was why? Answer me. It ain't enough for Lem Higley and other men to say I'm a lovely woman, but you have to run after that Hansen woman. That's it.'

'God a-mighty, Ope, that'll about do. That was all of the way I knowed how to manage.'

'There wasn't no other woman but that Hansen woman would do, I guess. Not a single other woman in this whole God-forsaken place, not one!'

'Now, see here, Ope, I done my best, and that's all of the best any man can do. I ain't aimun to have no love for Ella Hansen nor for any woman but you, so just forget this mad fit a yourn afore I lose my will power. I done my best. I guess it ain't nothun for a man to live here alone liken a dog and work the marrow outen his bones, is it? And you might a-been sneakun off with that-air Francis Chuzzer for all God knows. I don't say you did, but you mighten a-done that or something else.'

'I never did. I never seen him all the time I was down there.'

'I never say you did. But you mighten for all a man knows. Somehow or rather you mighten a-done it.'

Many times Dock returned to this matter, either to taunt her for distrusting him or to suggest that he had perhaps been with another woman while out with a load of grain. How could she know what he had been doing? He might have wandered into the red-light district or he might have gone over to see Kate Blodgett, the girl who had once kissed him at a dance. Kate, he said, would be up to see him any day now. And more cruel still: 'I bought some flowers for Ruth's grave ouden that load. I won't have no better wife nor Ruth, not if I live to be old as them Bible guys. She was a woman for a man to mourn about.'

And then one night, after returning late, he grinned at her shrewdly while eating his supper and afterward while standing with his back to the stove. Opal's eyes wavered when they met his or she trembled a little when she heard him speak. As soon as he was done with grinning he would say something, she knew, more terrible than any of his former taunts. And after a long while his grin slowly faded and he spoke. 'I guess mebbe Lem Higley slips over to see you as soon as I'm gone, don't he? I wonder if mebbe he's stayed all night yet.'

Opal rose from where she was rocking her babies to sleep and faced him, the color going from her cheeks, a wrath awaking in her eyes. Little spasms of pain tortured her white lips. For several long moments they looked at each other, Opal's breath coming slow and deep, a pale cold gleam lighting Dock's eyes

'What do you mean?' asked Opal, and her tone startled him.

'I said what I meant. I said it plain enough.'

Opal drew near, so near that she could feel his breath on her cheek. 'Do you mean I been Lem Higley's woman? God strike you dead, you coward, do you mean that?'

Dock's stare broke and he moved away from the heat of the fire. Opal followed swiftly, her body tense as a wild thing held by human hands.

'Don't be a fool!' he cried, stepping back as she pressed upon him. 'It was all right for you to accuse me, I guess. God and the angels, that was all right enough!'

Her anger going, sinking deep within and scattering her strength, Opal sat down and looked at him with bewildered eyes. The bewilderment vanished when Dock began to speak and anger flashed now and then, or it fled, too, and a growing wonder enveloped her thoughts.

'You thought I never knowed about Lem all last year. How he used to sneak over and see you when I was workun my guts out after them-there posts. You thought I never knowed and I knowed every time he come. A blind man could a-seen his trail in the snow, and I even knowed how many times he come. I don't remember now, but I knowed then. And not till this very day have I said a word about it.'

Deep feeling was shattering his voice and Opal half rose from her chair, a strange and wonderful

emotion of love burying her heart under and her power of speech. For a little while there was silence, broken only by the fire or by the murmur of a child. Slowly Dock looked at the twins, and a swift thought of what was in his mind brought Opal to her feet. She could no longer endure the pain in his face, in his eyes, the drooping of his shoulders and his limp hands from which all life seemed to have gone. But in the chaos of her mind she could discover no word that would make him believe, no cry that would ring with the great emotion in her heart.

'I know,' she said quietly, coming again to him. 'Lem used to come over, but I never give him no love, not the least little bit. He just come and talked and talked and I wouldn't even listen, but he didn't seem to care. And he ain't never been over this fall, not once he ain't. Lem Higley never touched me once in all his life, Dock, not once before God.'

Slowly Dock turned and looked at her. 'And you never give no love to Lem Higley? Afore God a-mighty do you swear that?'

'Before God I swear.'

He spoke her name and swiftly her arms went round his neck; and when he drew her to him she could hear the beat of his heart and she could hear an emotion choking the words he was striving to say.

The autumn was long and cold, swept by thin clouds of stinging frost driven by bitter winds hunting over the hills. The winter wheat was brown crisp leaves on the frozen earth. For the chickens Dock

had built a small coop and a shed for the pigs, and from the valley he had hauled hay and stacked it against the barn to shield his horses from the winds. He now had no work to do except the chores and the daily melting of snow, gathered from drifts, for his beasts. During the long evenings, by the wan light of a lamp, Opal read aloud to him from books which he had brought with a load of hay. They were dime novels and a book on personality and will power, given him by Mrs. Frant Pearce, an enormous fat woman, as Opal remembered her, who had a small lean husband. 'That Lib Pearce,' said Dock, 'is a well-educated woman, I guess. You oughten see what that-air woman's read. Enough books to learn a thousand people.'

Among the more alluring titles chosen first by Opal were 'Thorns and Orange Blossoms,' 'Capitola's Peril,' 'Homestead on the Hillside.' The first of these, she said, was a great book, a book she had always wanted to read. She knew a lot of girls who had read it and they said it was the greatest book in the world. But Dock was staring at a paper-backed novel called 'Thelma.'

'Mebbe this is a good one,' he said. 'I knowed a girl once named Thelma. Thelma Binney, do you know. She had black eyes fit to kill a man. I guess she married that worseless man John Haydow or Hoodow or something ...'

"'Thorns and Orange Blossoms' I want to read first. Nellie Moss read it and she says it's the best book ever written. It and 'Tempest and Sunshine.'"

But you ain't got "Tempest and Sunshine" that I can see.'

'I want to read this-here Thelma book. I want to see if this Thelma is like the one I knowed. Ope, I got a idea. My idea is that people with same names is lots alike. Looken Bert Dinsdall and Bert Later. Them two is like as twins. Looken Susan Cheevers and Susan Fox. Now I think about it, I guess people with same names is borned in the same month. That's a thought for a right mind. It wouldn't surprise me to say about.'

'Well, look at Helen Anderson and look at Helen Catrow. One's a little blonde and one's a big black old hag.'

'I don't know them, Ope. But they're alike in some way. They mebbe have something just as like as two frogs. And I'll bet this Thelma book is liken Thelma Binney. My mind's plumb set for this book first.

And so Opal read the story of Thelma, and Dock lay upon the floor with his hands under his head or he sat on the floor and rocked the twins to sleep. From time to time he would stop her to comment on a similarity between the two women. 'That's just the way Thelma Binney would a-spoke,' or, 'Thelma Binney looked liken that, or mebbe a little shorter.'

After Opal had been reading for a long while, Dock sat up and spoke of many matters which were becoming lucid in his mind. He had been thinking of many other people who were strikingly alike: of Bob

Spilsbury down at Rigby and Bob Jensen down at Menan, of Mary Thorpe and Mary Briggs. His idea, he could see, was worth much.

‘Lay down,’ said Opal, ‘and be still.’

But he did not lie down. He got up and paced the floor, talking the while. A great many facts had been overlooked and he would think of them anon. Perhaps Opal ought to keep a notebook in which he would set down his observations of men and things. Perhaps he would publish them all in a book some day, because his horoscope said he would achieve honor and fame and there was little telling by what way he would achieve these. In one way or another, but none could tell. ‘You must write them down and you’ll have a book afore you know it.’

He lay at her feet again. As Opal approached the emotional crisis of Thelma’s destiny, Dock would sit up more attentively, and Opal would draw his head to her knees, her hands playing over his face or searching for small things in his hair. Or her hands would creep quietly under his shirt, over the hard muscles of his shoulders and chest, and now and then she would stoop and kiss him. From time to time he would rise to put wood on the fire or to look at the sleeping babes.

Far into each night Opal read the books aloud, laughing over them or weeping over them, closing them often because silly tears blinded her eyes. For these lovely heroines and these brave heroes she was overwhelmed by sympathy, by a tenderness of love that ran down to long unstirred depths of her being,

and with them she challenged evil and won romance for a golden crown. Dock never wept, and she was glad he did not; but his voice would thicken and to his face would come a soberness that told her how deeply he was moved. And when the book was laid aside their embrace was new and strange, their intimacies allured by memories of other lovers and their ways. They were chastened by these tales of love, and for an hour they were pared to their souls, and when they lay to sleep they found each other again with the delicious vivid awareness that had been theirs in days of courtship. He kissed her more now than he had kissed her for months, in new ways and with awaking passion, or he broke into tuneless song or his old talk of things he would do. 'I guess I never knowed how to kiss a woman afore now,' he would say, a little ashamed; or he would murmur that she was a lovely woman, more lovely than those in the books. And for a happy while Opal would forget the ugly house and the cold world outside. The lovely color of girlhood came again to her lips and cheeks and a soft light to her eyes.

VI

THE new year rode in on a great white storm, soft and windless. Lem Higley came often during the winter months, deploring the cold loneliness of his cabin, and for hours in the dim afternoons or at night he and Dock would spin their yarns, talking of strange folk up here or of other strange people they had known, or they would exchange opinions of things which baffled them. Opal almost never spoke to Lem, and she rarely looked at him because in Dock's mind, she knew, there still lurked an old suspicion. But she listened to him with wonder for his endless chatter and his fund of strange tales, and when Dock was outside she would look at Lem swiftly to confirm her impression of his small alert eyes or his small body ornamented with huge shining buckles and studs. He had a funny kind of rosette at the top of his tall boots and around his waist he had a wide belt that glittered. When he talked he had a way of squinting his beady eyes and of drawing his lower lip stiffly up until a large wrinkle ran down either side of his chin. His laugh would begin in a series of little twitters and sink into a coughing far down in his throat.

Dock resented his nimble mind, his facile searching for things of interest, his endless flow of words; and when Lem was gone Dock would complain to Opal. 'That guy, great God, would talk the hind leg

often a mule. And he don't never tell a thing worth a man's say.' But as one starved, Opal listened to his words and she heard many things that filled her with quiet wonder. She guessed, too, that Dock complained largely because he was silenced whenever Lem came. 'A man can't get a word in head or tail when that-air fool unsteams hisself. He flows liken a river all day long and all night.'

Often Lem would stay for supper, but never without a vigorous protest. 'I ain't hungry, Dock, not the least bit. I just eat a dinner fit to kill a ox. I'm full as a tick. . . . I can't eat a bit, Dock, not a bite.' And then he would sit and eat as if he had been starved for days. 'This is so reckless good that I'll bust myself wide open. Say, you should ought to a-seen what I eat for dinner. . . . But a woman's cookun is the best for a man, I say, Dock. Likewise there ain't a bit of flavor in a man's grub, not without he's a trained cheaf.'

'My woman is a good cook afore God.'

'She's the best cook up here, Dock. That's what I says to Hansie. Your missus is no cook, I said to him . . .'

After supper was done, Dock and Lem would gather round the fire, one with his knees thrust into the oven, the other before the open grate, and they would talk usually until past midnight.

'I reckon you don't know what that Hansie Hansen just done. You know that big bay gilding he has, the one traded from Sam Lowder? I'll tell you what that fool done. He tied him up to the corner of

his stable and that horse yanked his tongue clean out, yanked it out cleanern a whistle. Don't pay no mind to that, Dock, without you can believe it for the God's truth. But that horse yanked his tongue out or I'm a liar a-settun here right now. I seen that horse's tongue, layun there in the snow, all bloody as hell. Hansie says he put a kind a hackamore hitch in the horse's mouth and some wise the horse got it round his tongue and yanked it clean out. The horse was mean to lead, pulled back, or I don't know, and that's the total result. Whoever heard of a horse yankun his tongue out?'

'Why, I knowed a horse yanked his tongue out. Chris Blodgett's horse done that years back. He had a loop in his mouth and got flirtun round with it and out come his tongue in a whip's crack. He was a little sorrel whiffet, I remember.'

'Well, that's the God's truth about Hansie's bay gilding. I seen the tongue layun bloody in the snow and I seen that horse standun with his head down, the blood a-spurgun out his nose. I wouldn't a-believed that no wise without I'd seen it myself. If a angel had told me that I would a-thought he was a ornery liar. For a fact I would. I'd a-said to him ——'

'What's that fool gone and done with his horse now?'

'He shot him with that high-powered gun he shot the moon with. He shot him square between his eyes, and that bullet went clear through and come out his hip, and how far that bullet went after it

come out only God can say. And mebbe He couldn't say very close to the right fact. Lock, stock, and barrel, that's the most shootun gun I ever seen. Say, it wouldn't surprise me he hit the moon like he says he did. I seen something happen in that moon when he shot. Mebbe it wasn't a bullet hole, Dock. Mebbe it was something I ain't figgered out yet, but something happened plain as mountains to my sight.'

'He never hit that moon,' growled Dock, and rose to put wood on the fire. 'That guy's a fool and you'll be a plumb fool without you stop listenun to him. Why, God a-mighty, Lem ——'

'Pay no mind to it, Dock, if you feel like that. But something happened to that moon. That's the God's truth or I'm a liar right now. I seen a puff-like, like the hair on a deer when it's hit. I never seen a hole like Hansie says he seen, but I seen something. Not every time he shot, I didn't, but twice I seen ——'

'Oh, for God a-mighty's sake, Lem! I tell you that Hansie's a plumb loonytick. You'd give a man Saint Vidas dance with your crazy talk shootun the moon with a rifle. It'd take a big cannon to shoot that-air moon and mebbe no cannon ain't big enough. You're a-gettun to be the most awful wind-bag I ever clapped my eyes on.'

Often their talk would turn to the strange old man across the river, the nameless one who had built a tiny shack under a cliff and who lived alone there with his dog.

And one evening Lem said: 'I mean to tell you what's on my mind. It's a secret I aim to tell no one but you.' He paused for a little while, deliberating his secret, perhaps, and studying Dock's face.

Outside a blizzard was entering the night and a wind was hurling handfuls of frozen snow like shot against the panes. Opal could hear winds hurrying in waves of snow over the hills and overhead she could hear sounds hunting through the dark.

'I've figgered a lot about that old fool,' resumed Lem. 'Where he come from, why he's over there. I got him all figgered to a fine point.'

The wind was coming in waves against the house, banking against it and flowing over its top with an even moaning or cutting around its corner and going off in screeching overtones. A volley of snow would shatter against the panes or there would come a cloud of white that in a moment was gone.

'Well?' said Dock, 'returning Lem's fixed stare. 'What's your fine point?'

'What I mean to tell you, Dock, the thing I mean is this. It's a secret, Dock. That old fool over there is a crimnul, a man of murder or something worse. There's a reward on that man's head, or I'm a liar a-settun here right now. I've thought deep about the matter and that's how it is to my sight. He's snuck off up here because the law's chased him nigh crazy. There's a big reward on that man's head sure as the nose on your face.'

For several moments Dock considered this conclusion, his eyes searching the lean furtiveness of

Lem, 'Mebbe there is. How much do you think it would be, the reward?'

'I've figgered on that too,' said Lem, making the lines deeper down his chin and almost shutting his beady eyes. 'It's a big reward, for the God's truth. No man would live in that hole without he'd done murder or robbed a bank. I figger there's ten thousand dollars on that man's head.'

There was another silence within and outside the storm was running swiftly on wild winds, sweeping the sky, plunging into coves and shouting out again into the wide-open spaces of night. Most of the house was full of the cold smell of it and shadows paled or darkened as the billows of storm went by.

'Ten thousand dollars,' said Dock, and he looked at Opal who came to where he sat before the blazing grate and put an arm around his neck. Lem looked at Opal's bare arm and then at her face and then at Dock's.

'Ten thousand dollars,' he repeated with less certainty, looking again at Opal's white arm and again up at her face. 'I aim to have that old fool arrested and get that ten thousand or I ain't worthy the name of Lem Higley. Why, I'll tell you, Dock. He might come out here and murder you or me or one of your kids. He might for a fact. I've thought about every side the matter. He's got a murderun man's face, I can tell the jiffy I look at him. I seen a murderun man's face before this, that man what slewed his wife and buried her in a well. Their faces ain't no whit different. I seen this old fool last summer,

a-runnun around with his dog down in Plateau Bottom. I seen him for a hour, and he never knowed I was anywheres about.'

'What was he after, for God a-mighty's sake?'

'Not a lick-splittun thing I could figger out. He chased all around there like he was a-lookun for something. He's got his gold buried there, but he never dug up a cent that day.'

'Didn't he say a word? Not a word to say about?'

'Not a word, Dock. By God, not a word. I come in sight after a spell, and he just looked at me like he was crazy. He just looked and looked and then he run away. There was shivers clear to my toes, Dock. He ain't no fit man to be lookun at when you ain't no gun with you. He's big as all outdoors, with a long black beard and crazy eyes that look plumb through you. He's a sight. He's a sight for to see, and that's a God's fact. It makes my blood go cold to think about him.'

Opal sat on Dock's lap and shuddered a little, and for a few minutes Lem seemed to forget his tale of the crazy old man while he studied her. His small alert eyes traveled up and down her body, pausing to search her face, or he would look swiftly for a moment at Dock. Opal knew without looking at him that he was watching her. She could feel his restless eyes exploring, searching out her loveliness, feeding hungrily on her face and body. Her thought went back to his statement that she was a beautiful woman or it went out to the old man in the loneliness of his cabin, under the driving storm. She could see it

now, something small and desolate in a wilderness of white, and she could see him in his cold bed with the savage dog curled at his feet. She could hear the icy blizzard coming blindly down the mountain over and around him, or screeching by as it went up the frozen river.

Dock was now staring soberly at the fire, and Lem's furtive eyes were searching the room. She could feel them come back to her, vivid and alive, upon her face and throat like a flame. They talked of other people up here and of their ways, of Jad Thurgenstowen and his blasphemy, of Tee Wynn and his charts of the stars, of Hansie and of his wife's flirtings, and of Susan Hemp, an old maid who had settled a homestead and though Opal had seen none of these, she was sure of knowing them anywhere. She thought of them now, in their little cabins under the storm, of these and others scattered here and there in the wild night loneliness. Down by Antelope Creek was Jad, large and dark, brooding by a fire in his small room and thinking his dark thoughts. Or perhaps he was out in the night still, stalking unafraid and cursing the wind.

Lem rose to build the fire and his shoes on the hard floor struck unfamiliar echoes through the house. Over on a round hill, three or four miles east of Jad's place, was Tee Wynn, a pale youth with lean hands and a long pointed face. What he was doing now, Opal could not imagine. The stars and the moon to-night were swallowed up by the storm. Perhaps he was lying huddled in a cold bed or per-

haps by a wan light he was drawing maps and seeking new names. Hansie Hansen, a very tall man, the tallest in Antelope, would be sitting by a fire clasp- ing his stomach, and his wife would be out with Con Wote, another large man with a huge nose that hooked down to his lip. Far away on the southern hills that lay against the mountain rim was Susan Hemp, a big angular woman with a square face. Most solitary of all these people would be Susan, who lived alone without a friend near. She worked in the fields like a man, following a hand plow or trudging in the soft earth behind a harrow, hauling a little grain out and a little hay back, giving nothing and asking for nothing to take. All these Opal would know at sight and others of whom they had talked and some day she would see them.

Lem aroused himself by the fire and said: 'By God, Dock, ain't it a hell of a life? For a fact, ain't it now? I been a-settun here thinkun deep about it, and the deeper I think the deeper it gets. There ain't no bottom to life, Dock, no bottom a-tall. If I was to set here and think till doomsday I'd never think it all out, I see now.'

'It's a funny world,' said Dock, shifting Opal to his other leg and looking more thoughtful. 'It's a funny world for any man's mind.'

'Sometimes I think about it so deep that my head aches fit to kill, it does. I think things out, but what good does it do me? It don't get me a cent and I go on, a-livun like a dog. I just slave my eye teeth out and I don't make enough to buy a smoked ham.

Judas priest, Dock, thinkun don't get a man no-where. I'll bet there ain't a man alive thought deeper about life than me, and what's the sense in it? When I die I'll be plumb finished, and I won't have a son knows Lem Higley ever lived.'

'It's a funny world, Lem. God a-mighty.'

'I'll be plumb finished, Dock, to my sight. And not even a kid to know I worked in this old world like a nigger. Not even one kid, Dock, and that's what sets me a-thinkun hard like I do. That's what weights on my mind like a heavy load. I'll go jiffying back to dust and there's the sum total what I'll make.'

'Life's a funny thing to say about, Lem. Some things I figger out clear as your nose and some things I don't. Some things I figger out liken I made them.'

'I aim to stop my deep thinkun some. If I had a missus and kids, I'd never think another lick in all my days. I'd be satisfied, and I'd let other men think these-here things out. But in God's plan a creation there don't seem to be no missus for Lem Higley. By God, Dock, I'm thirty-seven and not a missus in sight yet.' Lem brooded for a little while, and Dock tightened his arm around Opal's waist. Lem saw the gesture of possession and looked quickly at Opal. 'I guess I'm all-fired ugly, ain't I? Women don't look at me. Take your missus now: she don't never look at me. I'm your friend, ain't I, Dock? Say whether I'm your friend, but she don't never look at me.'

'She looks enough at you, Lem,' said Dock, and drew Opal to him.

Lem eyed them with doubt and a little leer of distrust. 'Religion stunted me, Dock, and that's the total sum my misfortune. I'd a-been a big man, for the God's truth, if religion hadn't a-got inside me. My brothers is big men, six foot in their sock feet if they're a inch. I'll tell you, when I was a kid I had more visions'n them Bible guys ever dreamed about. For a fact I did. I seen more angels than heaven could hold if it was twice as big as it is. Why, when I went swimmun with kids I baptized them, no joke, and then I set on the bank and prayed for them. I'd be some man right now if it wasn't what religion done for me. Say, Dock, do you believe in a God?'

'Why, sure I do. I've figgered out there's a God all right.'

'How do you figger it out, Dock?'

'Why, God a-mighty, Lem. What do you suppose makes that-air storm a-hootun liken all death outside? What do you suppose put all these things here, anyway? What do you suppose makes it winter and then summer and then winter?'

'Why, I thought about that deep the other night, Dock. I know what does that. It's the moon what does that. That moon ain't flame, Dock, like you said. It's ice. Ain't you never seen the sun shine on ice? It looks just like that moon.'

'God a-mighty!' cried Dock, and his large eyes turned upon Lem with unspeakable disgust.

'For a fact, Dock, that's all there is to it. That

moon's a big hunk of ice, and when it floats north we have winter and when it floats south we have summer. And that ain't the only moon in the sky, neither. There's a lot a moons in the sky. There's a whole string a moons right around the earth.'

'God a-mighty,' said Dock again, and drew forth his plug of tobacco. 'You got the worst chin music I ever heard in my life-long. Why, if that moon's a chunk a ice, what holds it up there? I guess it just floats around in the air, don't it?'

For a little while Lem was thoughtful. 'Why, the same thing what holds the sun up. What holds the sun up?'

'Oh, for God sake! Flame don't need no holdun up, man. Flame goes right up its own self. Don't you ever use your eyes to say about? And that moon's a fire, sure enough. I've saw fire just liken the color that moon.'

'Well, if it's fire, what does it burn? What does that sun burn? I've thought deep about that, too, and ain't figgered it out yet. How big is that sun, Dock, do you reckon? I figger that sun's about as big as this earth.'

'Hell, no, Lem. You ain't figgered things out, I can see. Looken this stove now. It warms this whole house, but it's only a little thing by the side it. That-air sun's only a little thing by the side this earth.'

'Another reason that moon's ice,' said Lem, 'is plain as a mountain to my sight. When it comes up north, we have cold spells, and when it goes back

south, we have warm spells. Now the sun's just the other way about. Judas priest, how do you figger that out if that moon ain't ice like I say?'

'That moon ain't ice, Lem. That's the craziest notion I ever heard tell about.'

They both deliberated again, and silence closed around them, a small silence between them and the storm. The army of winds was marching eastward, endlessly banked around the window sill, and spread over the panes were mounds and sheets of driven snow. Lem huddled nearer the oven and Dock made up the fire. Dock was placing his hands upon his knees to shield them from the heat, withdrawing them, placing them again, and from time to time he leaned over and squirted into the grate. When Opal turned her head away from the fire, she could see the cloud of her breath and on the panes she could see the snow glazing to sparkling frost.

Lem thrust his arms far into the oven and leaned over the stove, turning his face from side to side to give it heat. After a little, he looked over at Dock and said: 'Another thing. What do you suppose that sky's made out of?'

'That sky? Why, I ain't never thought a whole lot about it.'

'Well, mebbe it's that sky holds the moon up. That sky is made out of something, Dock. But how does that moon move all around it like it does? Mebbe it rolls around on top of the sky some ways. . . . But now that I think deeper, that idea don't seem worth a tinker's hoot.'

‘That moon’s a flame, Lem, what moves around in that-air sky. I can’t say how right off, but that’s how it does.’

‘And say, what holds this old earth up, did you ever think? There ain’t nothun around this earth and it’s just a-floatun, far as I can make out.’

‘Why, I’ve knowed for years what holds this-here earth up. At the poles it’s fast to something. Mebbe it’s fast to the sky. It just turns around on a ex, this earth does. It’s got a ex run plumb through it that’s fast to the sky at the poles.’

‘Judas priest!’ cried Lem, sitting up. ‘That ain’t no fit idea how this earth works. Science says there ain’t nothun at the poles but one direction, not another thing but north, they say, or mebbe it’s south ——’

‘I don’t care a tinker’s damn for what science says. Don’t tell me this earth is just a-floatun around. All my reason is set against what science says. Why, if it’s just a-floatun out here, why don’t it get nearer that-air sky sometimes? That wind outside now, Lem, would blow it to hell.’

‘It does get nearer that sky, Dock. Sometimes that sky is right down close, sometimes it’s away off there.’

‘Well, why don’t it ever bump into that sky? Why don’t it fall? Why don’t it fall now, tell me that.’

‘Mebbe it will,’ said Lem, grinning at Opal. ‘Mebbe it’ll fall any day now. I guess that’s the end the world the Bible talks about.’

'God a-mighty, Lem. You'd give a man Saint Vidas dance.'

There were signs of an early spring. A few birds came when the ground was still white and twittered among the bushes, and over the earth there was a glorious warmth. From the valley came new neighbors, all strangers to Opal. On the north, between Dock's place and the river, settled the Averys, and on the south, just over the hill in another cove, were Hype Hunter and his wife, Mary, and their three children. Hype was Dock's cousin. He came over one wet March day to borrow the tank, and Opal stared at him until she was ashamed. Though not more than thirty, Hype was completely bald, and his head, instead of being smoothly oval like other bald heads that Opal had seen, was a grotesque assortment of bumps. His high narrow forehead was thrust forward so that it made a straight line with his nose and chin; above either ear there was a funny swelling in his skull and over the top of his head were tiny polished mounds and smooth hollows. Opal wondered if when a boy his head had been crushed or if it had come misshapen from birth. And his face in a grotesquely harmonious way matched his head. His cheek bones, of uneven size, were other swellings, and his chin was skewed to one side. And yet, Opal decided, his face when taken as a whole was not ugly, quite, perhaps because of his eyes, handsome gray eyes alive with mirth and shrewdness. His legs were much too long for his body and their length was en-

hanced by his round shoulders and by the way he thrust his head forward. He had long arms and huge hands that hung many inches below his sleeves. Opal thought he was about the funniest-looking thing she had ever seen, but she liked him at once, his large smile that stretched his mouth far back, the laughter of his eyes, his chatter.

'Say, where's Dock?' he asked, searching for drinking-water. 'You hain't hurt that old fool yet, have you?'

'Hurt him! Why, he's just as good as when I married him, I guess.'

Hype chuckled between drinks and looked over his cup at her with speculative interest. 'Look what my wife done to me,' he said, and stroked his head with a large hairy hand. 'She put all them bumps on there. She pulled all my hair out first and then she put all them bumps on there. Do you know anything will make hair grow?'

Opal said she did not. She knew a man who had used coal oil, but she had known another who used it and who had died of some strange kind of brain fits. She once knew a woman who had lost her hair in typhoid fever and who had brought in new hair with the water of boiled sagebrush. 'And I know a man down the valley who uses skunk oil mixed with a herb I forget. He's got a lot of nice hair.'

'I guess I've used everything about,' said Hype, again stroking his head. 'Skunk oil and plasters of ginger and pepper and sagebrush and sunshine. . . . I'll have a blistered head before long, baked like a

crust. My head will crack open like a green board in the sun, won't it? I hain't used coal oil, though, and I might. I got room in these bumps for a lot of fits. Say, did you ever hear use of gunpowder made into a liquid? I'm tryun a lot of things. I have a old horse over there and I've pulled the hair out on spots, and now I'm tryun different things on different spots. When I find something will make hair grow on him, I'll use it. Did you ever hear balsam sap? That's the best thing for cuts I ever seen. I know a man worked at a sawmill years ago and he near cut his foot off with a axe. Just filled his shoe with balsam sap and went right on. You could track him all over by the blood, but he never stopped work and his foot healed right up. I'm puttun balsam sap on one spot that old horse. Say, if you hear of anything, let me know, won't you? Ain't this place a country for a man to starve to death in, though? Or mebbe you've fallen love with it.'

'I sure have not. I hate it. I hate it like poison.'

'Can't say that I hate it. But it and me won't get along like friends. Say, now, tell me the truth: what have you done to Dock?'

A week passed before Opal saw Mary, Hype's wife. The snow was melting rapidly, and down the hills ran torrents of muddy water or it spread in dark sheets and made small lakes in the coves. One afternoon, when her children were asleep, Opal went over the wet hill and found Mary in a covered wagon. She was a fragile woman into whose face age had come prematurely. Her blue eyes and delicate

skin must once have been lovely, but her eyes were red now as if from weeping, and under them were countless fine wrinkles and other wrinkles had gathered in her face and neck. Her skin had a ghastly transparency that exposed blue veins, in either temple, across her forehead, on her hands and arms. Opal saw all these while talking and thought of her own loveliness, swiftly fading. About Mary there was something strangely appealing, a quiet charm that was still girlish, in the lines of her slender body, in the light of her smile, in the delicate blue of her eyes. Her voice was clear but tremulous, faltering over its words; and as Opal hurried homeward to her babes, she was haunted by it as by the cry of a lost thing.

For many days she thought often of Mary Hunter, just over the muddy hill, cooped in a wagon that was stuffed with two dirty beds and with a small ugly stove and innumerable unclean things. There was such silent suffering in Mary's face as she had never seen in any human face before, and yet behind it somehow there was bright hopefulness, a timid spirit that still found all things lovely in the world. She wondered why Mary had married Hype and what her life had been, and little by little she came to know. Mary had been only fifteen when she married, and, although only twenty-four now, she had given birth to six children, three of whom had been born dead. She had been dragged here and there by the restless Hype, living now in a road camp, now in a sheep wagon high among lonely

mountains, and again in a tent on a Wyoming desert homestead. In her nine years of married life she had never had a house, not even a shack, of her own. Never had she lived more than a few months in one place. One of her babes had been buried in the cemetery of sagebrush and gravel at Annis, Idaho, one of them in the Wyoming desert, and the third in the mountains where Hype had herded sheep. These things she told Opal little by little, faltering over the hard things of her past, looking toward the east where she had left two sons. Opal wanted to speak the sympathy of her heart, but she could find no words gentle enough, no words delicate enough for the quiet of this mother's face. She asked what Mary had named her sons and Mary said one was named Henry and one George and one John. It was John in Wyoming and it was George somewhere in the mountains. She would never see their graves again. Hype had promised to take her to them some day, but all his promises were lies. He had promised to build her a house here, but all her days she would live in a sheep wagon or in a tent.

The loveliness of spring awakened Dock from his long depression and he began to talk again, in his old way, of things he would do. He was first among pioneers up here, he told Opal with sober pride, and he would be the best of them all, the one with the finest crops and the handsomest home ere he was done. His winter wheat had not been killed and now came thick and strong from the earth. His spring

wheat was soon above ground, and hard May rains promised a good harvest of both. Next fall he would pay his debts, and enough money would remain to buy new machinery or a frame house, or he would perhaps buy some milk cows and another team. He had heard of an enlarged Homestead Act, and possibly he could now acquire three hundred and twenty acres or a full section.

To other Antelope farms he turned a jealous eye, and to Opal he would talk with pleasure of Jad's scanty winter wheat or of the redroot in Hansie's or of the thistles in a farm elsewhere. When he went to the valley, to buy food or seed grain, he would look carefully at farms along the way, noting the kind of plow this man used or the way that man drilled, comparing other acreage and other grain with his own, staring at lean horses and thinking of his own fat ones; and upon returning he would talk for hours of all he had seen. Jad would starve to death, certainly, because he didn't know a thing about plowing ground, skimming the surface the way he did and expecting wheat roots to push down into the sod. Hansie Hansen had not drilled his grain deep enough and it would never stand the drouth. Ed Wynn was an ignorant fool, plowing his ground uphill instead of plowing around the hill and turning the earth downward. Plowing around hills, said Dock, was his own idea. In time there would be no hills left if these men would plow down instead of up. Jim McHenry had bought a Deering binder, the bull chain of which would snap in two like a halter rope

when the packer arms got tangled in mustards and tumbleweeds. Orson Terry had bought a drag drill instead of one with disc-wheel droppers, and it would never work in a dry year when clods were as large as pumpkins. Half the people up here, he said, would starve to death in no time. Down in the valley a man could throw seed upon the ground and irrigate it and it would grow. Any kind of a fool could raise crops down there. But up here a man would have to know the way of things; he would have to use his brains. 'I kallate show these people how to be a dry farmer. I aim to be the best dry farmer up here.'

As Opal listened to him, she wondered if there was truth in what he said, and with new interest she awaited what the future held. Upon these hills there was unfolding a great drama, the struggle between these men and these arid hills, a matching of tiny human strength and ingenuity against the immeasurable blind and pitiless power of this rolling desert. Perhaps in the end there would be for every one here only defeat and loss, a hopeless gathering of worn-out things and a moving valleyward, older and with no dreams ahead. Behind them these hills would lift their scarred backs and again the sagebrush and weeds would claim their own. Or perhaps in a few years this Antelope country would be a vast rolling surface of lovely green in June, and in August an almost unbroken area of waving gold. To a thought of what these men might make of this country Opal was strangely moved with awe, because

never before had she thought of life as a struggle between man and blind forces about him. The earth where she once lived had seemed eager and unresisting and there had been no need of snow and winds and rain. These things, indeed, had not been wanted and had seemed to be alien to the beauty of growing life, because during haying time the rains had rotted alfalfa in its bunches and the winds had kept men idle. Here everything was changed. The dry earth was man's enemy and the storms were his friends. No longer did she fret when driving rains melted the roof of her house and washed its mud upon her floor, when it drowned her small chickens and bore them away on dark streams, when it made in the corral and stable ankle-deep muck that Dock carried for days on his shoes. Rain above all things else she looked for and hoped for, and when a period of drouth came she would search the sky for clouds or with Dock she would read the calendars and compare their predictions. His signs of coming storms she distrusted, and she sought other signs of her own. Foggy circles around the sun or the moon, spectrum-like rays streaming skyward at sunset, the cry of an owl or the flight of wild geese, the wail of a coyote, the alarm of chickens and slinking of beasts, all of these signs she distrusted because she had seen all of them fail. In the swift rise of smoke from the earth or in dewless mornings she put more trust. It never rained, she learned, when mornings were wet with dew or when smoke came down and crept over the ground; but when she went out at sunrise and

found the aspens dry or when smoke went straight up and out of sight she looked for rain and nearly always the rain came.

Often Dock and Hype would match their weather lore, and Opal would listen to them and try to measure the reason of what they said.

'I know of only one sure enough sign of rain,' Hype declared one hot June day. 'God never give but one sign and that's why He give us corns. When my feet begins to swell and my corns almost bust with pain, I know a storm is somewheres about.'

'That ain't no fit sign,' said Dock.

'That's the only reason God give a man corns. Rheumatics is a good sign, I happen to know. I ain't got no rheumatics, but men what has can always tell when a storm's around. I know a old guy in the valley can tell by rubbun his whiskers. When his whiskers pops with electricity like a cat's back, why, rain's on its way.'

'The best sign is when that-air old sun draws water. When it draws water down in them long lines, look out for a ungodly downpour.'

'I don't know about that. But, say, Mary can always tell by her teeth. Her teeth aches about to crack her jaw when rain's to come. She walked the floor all night before that last rain.'

'Drawun water's the best sign. There ain't no better sign in God a-mighty's world. I never see it fail, not in all my life-long.'

'I guess I know another sign, too. It's when the veins sticks out your hands. Old Gus Arnold, who I

herded sheep for, says that's sure as Dutch cheese. His veins used to come out big as a wagon tongue all over hisself. Say, Dock, you don't happen to know what's good for a bald head, do you?'

The rains in this summer were many and hard, and Opal lived as much as possible outside her ugly drenched house. She and Mary would leave their children for a little while with Dock or with Hype and they would go over the hills in search of wild flowers or of strange birds. Loveliest of wild flowers, said Mary, were the harebells growing everywhere, hidden among the sagebrush and tall grasses or in thick undergrowths by the aspen groves. There was something strange, Opal thought, in the sight of hundreds of these delicate flowers among all the harsh, rugged things of these hills. Mary said it was God's way to mix the ugly and the beautiful the world over. There were many other wild flowers, here: patches of flaming paint-brushes, tiny bowers of sweet peas, goldenrods with their flowing plumes, tall yarrow topped with its white massed florets, and violet-purple asters. All these Mary knew by name, but there were many others which she did not know.

Growing on a precipice down by the river there had been, earlier in the year, a garden of the loveliest white lilies she had ever seen. Opal wondered at the number and beauty of wild flowers here and said it was strange that she had not noticed them a year ago. There were many now, Mary told her, because the year was wet; in a dry year there would be only

the yarrow, a few stunted asters, the red flowers of thistles and the paint-brushes. High in the mountains where Hype had herded sheep there had been pure white columbines and acres and acres of fireweed and wild honeysuckle. 'I love these best,' she said, and she sat down and touched a harebell as gently as she might have touched a wild bird.

She never picked flowers, because she had seen death so often in her life that she could not endure to see flowers die. The sight of a bouquet of them made her very sick. In the mountains around the grave of her son the columbines and tiger lilies had been growing when she left it, and if ever she went back she would go when these would be blooming again.

'Have you seen Mag Avery who lives over north of you? It's mean to say you don't like any person, but I don't like her. She goes out every day and gathers a whole armful of wild flowers and lets her kids tear them up. I can't stand anything like that.' Her blue eyes searched Opal's face, and Opal knew she would never like Mag. Dock had said she was a woman with a man's face and a body like that of a beef ox.

As they went slowly over the hills, Mary would stop now and then to touch a flower, to lift one above the grass that was stifling it, or to show Opal one in a dry spot to which she had brought a little water on a former day and around which she had pulled the weeds. And Opal marveled at her simple love for all these things and at the beauty which this quiet wo-

man found here where Opal had thought beauty never could be. Loveliest of all trees, Mary said, was the silver aspen in a wind when its leaves seemed to be a million tiny birds. It grieved her to see Hype cut them for posts and stovewood or to see him drive staples into the growing ones that were in the line of his fence. 'I'm silly, I know,' she said, giving Opal a quick, fearful look as if all her life she had been mocked for her love of flowers and trees. 'But I can't help it. I can't stand to see lovely things killed.' Without speaking, Opal slipped an arm around Mary's waist.

Over in the cove behind the sheep wagon, Mary showed her a small pine tree, no taller than a man and without another of its kind anywhere near. Mary said it was beautiful, and she touched it as gently as she had touched the flowers. She thought it was lonely here, just as human beings were lonely, no matter where. Her troubled laugh told Opal that again Mary was saying what she would say to no other person in the world. 'Sometimes in the night I wake up and think of it out here in the dark and I weep like a silly thing and Hype ——' But she stopped suddenly without telling what Hype did, nor did she ever tell, though from things that happened later Opal formed an opinion of Hype's most secret ways.

The fields were again yellow with wild mustards, but the wheat, unlike that of last year, stood up firm and strong and put forth large and well-filled

heads. Dock went cheerfully to work, and out on the hills where he was preparing new land Opal could hear his loud, tuneless song or she could mark the course of his harrow by a cloud of dust. While he was singing, she knew, he would be eating aspen leaves, because when he chewed tobacco he never sang. During summer months he always carried a pocketful of leaves, and each morning before breakfast he would eat a few and he would chew them again while he lay to sleep, sometimes spitting the bitter juice upon the floor. They were for his stomach trouble, he said, and for his appetite and to build his health from head to feet. Often he would eat the bitter leaves of yarrow or from the river he would bring a supply of kinnikinic bark. 'Quakun asp leaves is for to build my blood. Them yarrow is for my liver and that-air bark, that's for my kidneys. If I had some wild graperoot, that would set me up in a jiffy.'

During long afternoons when heat was oppressive, Opal would take him a drink of water, cooled in the earth, and while his horses rested he would talk. The wheat heads were the largest he had ever seen and their kernels were full and plump. The yield would be forty bushels, perhaps fifty. Thirty acres of winter wheat would thresh twelve hundred bushels, or he was a bigger blatherskite than Quirl Avery, and forty acres of spring wheat would thresh a thousand or more. Two thousand bushels, to say the least that a man could, were what he would have, and the price would be no less than fifty cents. It

might be more, because frost had hit the wheat of the Middle Western States.

'If frost kills all the wheat back there, I'll mebbe get a dollar, and I kallate it will. I've set my hopes for a big frost back there.'

'You're a fine Christian,' said Opal. 'You seem to want all them farmers back there to starve to death.'

'God, woman, no, I don't neither. It's the Lord will do it, not me. Anyway, them farmers is plumb rich back there. They can let us make a little now. My hopun won't influence that-air frost none. It'll come or it won't, I figger.'

He swept an arm toward the western hills of Antelope and bade her look. On the southern slopes lying against the mountains she could see small patches of wheat turning to gold, and here and there over the flatter country were other fields, surrounded by reaches of desert gray. Lying over hills and running along vales were dark spots of plowed land, and on the higher hills to the south were other spots among aspen groves. In no time at all, he said, this country right here would control the wheat market of the world. There would be no wheat land like it anywhere. In five years or in ten the hundred square miles of Antelope would be in August an almost unbroken field of gold. 'Just figger it out if you can. How many acres is there, do you know? There's thousands and thousands, and for each acre there'll be fifty bushels a wheat. Right soon now we'll conquer these-here hills. I'm about to figger out new ways to farm. Do you reckon I can get a patent if I

figger out how to keep this ground wet in a dry year? That's what I aim to do.'

He dug into the earth with his hands to show Opal how wet it still was near the surface. His way of touching the soil and of looking at it reminded Opal of Mary's way with wild flowers. But stranger than Mary's love was Dock's, because for Opal there was nothing lovely or sweet in this earth. Dock would spread it in his hand and he would talk of its rich color and its fineness and he would place it against his cheek to feel its cool dampness. His feeling for it was strangely like love, and Opal's mind that reached for understanding found only wonder for Dock and his ways.

'Do you think I could get a patent, Ope? I aim to figger how to keep this earth wet in a dry year. That's my aim and I'm a-beginnun to think deep for it.'

And at night when he came in he would tell of other aims, of other dreams that had come to him while working, and, though Opal responded to his eagerness, she could see little sense in what he said. He was figuring out a way to conquer wild mustards. Not for a minute did he intend to let these overrun his farm and turn it into a sheep pasture. Somehow he would conquer them, by fanning their seeds out of his grain or by summer fallowing or by hook or crook. He would find water in these hills, and not much longer would he endure the taunting chin music of Quirl Avery who had exclaimed: 'Say, for the truth now, what's that posthole in your door-

yard!' One of these days he would hit that silly fool hard enough to break him in two.

'Why, what's the matter now? I thought you said you liked him. I thought you said he made you laugh almost to die.'

'His chin music gets on my mind, Ope. I've heared windbags afore now, that-air Lem, God a-mighty! But this lummoX is the most worseless I ever heared. What account is he, do you know? He's laziern sixty, and that beef missus a hisen! If I had a woman as plumb ugly as her I'd never stick my face outen my shirt.'

He would conquer the mustards and he would find water, but he would do greater things than these. He would raise the best grain in Antelope and he would sell seed grain at a high price to all the farmers roundabout. He would discover a way to harvest grain without waste, to make it stool much more than it now did, and, greater than all these, he would learn how to grow tall plump wheat without any rain at all.

And after listening to his talk, Opal would say: 'You're dreamun yourself crazy. You'll just get all tangled up in your dreams like a fly in a spider's web, and there you'll be for good.'

'Liken a fly!' cried Dock, looking at her pityingly. 'You don't give a man much hope, that's a fact, but them's what I aim to do. And them ain't halfun what I'll do, Ope, or I'm a bigger blatherskite than Quirl Avery. . . . Afore God, you ain't much hope to a man!'

It was not until harvesting time that Opal saw Mag Avery. She was bathing the twins when the room darkened, and upon looking up she saw Mag's huge bulk framed in the doorway, Mag's hard eyes watching her.

'Why, hello!' cried Opal, a little bewildered, and stood up. 'Won't you come in?'

But Mag did not come in at once, nor did she speak for many moments. She remained impassively silent, her eyes searching the room, coming back to Opal and the twins or going over to Dick who was crawling on the floor. She had a large square face hung with heavy jaws.

'So you're the woman Dock Hunter married,' she said, and stared at Opal again. 'Is all them kids yourn, do say! And you only a chit of a girl!' Entering now, she sat and crossed her legs and arms. 'Tell me how old you might be for a fact. Not above twenty, if I would make a guess.'

Opal said she was twenty-three; almost twenty-four, to tell the whole truth.

'Just a wee chit, if I do say it myself,' said Mag, and on her face, Opal thought, there was a faint smile of mockery and pity. Mag looked again at the twins or her eyes again searched the house, the piled-up things in corners, the yellow stains on walls, the ugly bedroom. 'You ain't a happy married woman, I see, if I speak what's on my mind. But you wouldn't own to that.' Opal shrank from the hard, mocking laugh that followed. 'What's Dock mon-keyun at out in the field? I knowed Dock before he

married that Whetzel woman. You knowed he run away with Ruth Whetzel and her old man nigh died with a plectic stroke? I guess you did, or didn't he never tell you about hisself before he married you? I guess mebbe you never knowed his first wife died with a broken heart. What do you call them kids?'

Opal told their names, a distrust growing large in her heart for this huge mannish woman with her mocking face. She remembered how Mag gathered wild flowers for her children to tear with dirty hands, and how she snared mourning doves and fried them for her clownish husband. Dock had said she even caught blackbirds and robins and made them into dainty pies. And now, while she washed her babies and avoided Mag's hard eyes, Opal was measuring the meanness of these ways and wondering at the darkness of this woman's heart.

'You're a wee chit of a thing, I do say, to have three kids aready. Why you can't weigh but a hundred pounds, if I was to guess.' There was another silence during which Mag's alert eyes explored everything to be seen. 'I ain't heared you deny you was unhappy, married like you be to Dock Hunter who run off with Ruth Whetzel and broke her heart in the least time to mention.'

Opal's dark eyes flashed swiftly at Mag and she stood up again, trembling a little. 'Of course I'm happy and who said I wasn't? And if I ain't, it's none of your business, is it?'

Mag laughed a hard, mocking laugh and stared at

Opal with relentless cunning. 'Well, I come to loan a little snitch a butter. My man won't eat doves fried in a thing but butter, not if he starved to death. He's got a rich tongue for dainty titbits ——'

'And you expect butter from me to fry doves in!'

'Just a snitch ——'

'You can't have it. Not if I had a million pounds you couldn't have it.'

'You mean you won't loan a snitch and you with two milk cows with bags big as a wash-tub?'

'Not to fry birds in, I sure won't! Not if you starved to death.'

Mag stood up, and Opal was a little appalled by her size, by her big square face and by her enormous arms. 'Not a wee snitch you won't loan, you say? Not a mite of butter to a neighbor? Land's fire, be you that stingy now, for the honest truth? I always heard little people was stingy people ——'

'Not to fry doves in, I won't. Call me stingy, I don't care. Call me anything you want to.'

'Mebbe you'll want to loan a snitch of something from me some day. Mebbe ——'

'I never will. Not if I starve to death.'

Mag stared at her for several moments, a sly smile resting lightly on her face. 'You got spirit in that wee body yourn. . . . I don't know how I'll get supper without a mite of butter. I could tell you a lot about this man you married, if that was my mind.'

Opal gave no answer, and Mag went slowly out and homeward. Then, stung by the taunt in Mag's

last words, she ran to the door and called: 'And don't you go pickun no more flowers on our place! This swale here is our place and you keep out of it!'

Mag stopped for a moment, and then came back, slowly and with wrath waking in her great body. 'Listen to me, you wee chit!' she cried, and Opal recoiled a little from her eyes. 'My man and me aims to be good neighbors, but if you stick up your back in this way, why, it's your look-out for storm. I'll pick flowers where I see fit, right in your dooryard if I see fit, and if your man says boo to me, why, my man'll come over and bust him double like a jack-knife.'

'Oh, he will!' cried Opal derisively. 'Well, let him try and see!'

'And as for you,' Mag went on, grinning mockingly, 'I'll take a small nobody like you over for my kids to play with. Keep that on your mind for a while.'

Mag turned slowly homeward again, and out on a hill Opal saw her stop and look around her. Then she stooped and seemed to be gathering flowers, and when she straightened she looked back at Opal before passing over the hill.

Trembling with rage, Opal wanted to find Dock at once, but she dared not leave her babies and she could not carry them with her. As well as she could she gave her time to little tasks, though her eyes were blinded by tears; and when Dock came in sight she ran out to meet him. With her face against him,

her arms reaching up to his neck and trembling there, she told the tale of Mag's insults and threats, and as she sobbed her words she could feel Dock's body growing hard. 'Oh, she's a beast!' wailed Opal, raising her wet eyes to him. 'Why did such a awful woman have to come up here?'

Dock's eyes turned toward the Avery homestead. 'She said her man would double me up liken a jackknife, did she? You're plumb sure she said that?'

'Them's her very words. She says, "I'll pick flowers right in your dooryard if I see fit," and she says, "If your man says boo to me, why, my man will bust him double like a jackknife."'

'And what did you say to that?' asked Dock, still looking toward the Avery place.

"Just you let him try and see. Just let your man try and see," I said to her.'

Dock tightened his arms around her waist and erected himself another inch. 'I don't allow for any chin music from that-air guy, Ope. He's biggern me, but I'll wise him up to what he never knowed about his life-long. One yeep outen that guy and I'll hit him so hard he'll go liken hell kicked him in the end. He'll go liken a wheelbarrow run on wheels a light-nun. Is that the right of what she said, that without I cow down to him he'll double me liken a jackknife? You're sure you heard right?'

'Them's her words,' said Opal, drawing away a little and thinking of her children. 'If you say boo, he'll try and double you like a jackknife.'

Arm to waist they went to the house and Opal

told him again of Mag's effort to borrow butter to fry doves in.

'You done right, Ope. Not a speck'll we ever loan them two. I've knowed that Mag Avery — Mag Thorngren her name was — I've knowed her for long enough, and she always was a worseless sight. I've knowed that Quirl, too. Nothun but a shitepoke he was when a kid, the biggest gawk I ever set eyes on.'

To whet his dying rage, Opal told also of how Mag gathered flowers and of Mary's love for these, and of how there would not be a harebell left anywhere. This terrible woman was stripping these lonely hills of their last loveliness, and Opal said she could almost murder her with a pure heart. She was snaring the few song birds that came here and cooking them into dainty pies for her no-account of a husband. There was little telling what ugly ways she had not yet shown. Next year, no doubt, she would strip the serviceberry bushes of their blossoms, and she would prowl down by the river and pick the few raspberries that grew there. Her tongue was poisoned and her heart was full of meanness, as any one could see.

For many days Dock would return now and again to this subject, telling what he would do with Quirl once he got his hands on him or telling new tales of Mag's girlhood. Out of a silence he would blurt suddenly: 'God a-mighty! So she said he'd double me up liken a jackknife, did she? Them's her very words, as you remember.' And Opal would make no answer, or she would say again, a little wearily, that those were Mag's exact words. 'Why, that man

talks too much, Ope, to be on the fight, without he's cornered liken a coyote. He blanneys all his life-long time. His old tongue wags liken a bell clopper. That-air guy won't fight, Ope, not in a million year.'

While harvesting his wheat, Dock labored sixteen hours in every twenty-four. He borrowed two teams from Hype, and with four horses he would cut from early morning until noon; with four fresh horses he would then cut until evening, and again with his first teams he would cut until long after dark. Above his binder at night he hung a lantern to guide him, and Opal could see its wan light out in the field, rising over a hill and disappearing and again rising far to the south and vanishing again. Sometimes, on a western breeze, she could hear his oaths faintly, and she knew he was cursing the weeds that tangled round the packer arms or clogged in the knotter. At night he would fret in his sleep and mumble words or he would suddenly sit up and claw at the air and curse while Opal shuddered. There was no reason, she would say, in his working through so many long hours after other men had stopped, but Dock would dismiss her protests with a shrug. He was not a lazy skunk like Quirl Avery; he would be known as the hardest worker on the Antelope bench.

When the wheat was cut and shocked, he hired Joe Smith to help him haul it, and then he searched the country for men to help him thresh. Most of them were busy in their own fields, and in the end Dock had to offer a job to Quirl. He came late one morn-

ing, carrying a pitchfork, and Opal saw him for the first time. She had imagined that Hype Hunter was the funniest-looking man in the world, but funnier still was Quirl, so funny in his appearance and so strange in his ways that Opal was never done with staring at him. He reminded her of a gorilla of which she had once seen a picture. He had enormous shoulders that tapered to lean, almost thin, hips and legs, and between his shoulders and head there seemed to be no neck at all. His face was narrow and very long and formed a rectangle, being little wider at the forehead than at the chin. He had cunning eyes set close together, and a long thin nose that spread into a funny triangle above his mouth. He was very hairy, on his hands and bare arms and on his chest where his shirt opened, and a short beard almost covered his face, growing nearly to his eyes and running down to meet the hair on his chest. And around him was his furtive way, not the small beady way of Lem Higley, but a large slinking way out of which he leered.

While eating his meals he would stop suddenly and from a pocket he would draw forth a handful of small sticks. One of these he would thoughtfully choose and pick his teeth with it, and when he was done he would wipe the stick on his trousers and return it to his pocket. And he would talk loudly of things he had done, his voice beginning as if in rage and falling into a thin whine or into a kind of writhing, tortured laugh. He had quarreled with Jack Nevel, a new homesteader on the north of his

place, and of this quarrel he talked again and again. 'He says, Your sheep can't run on my farm, and I says, My sheep will or you'll get your face poked. I says, I'll put this fist in your mouth. One or the two, I says, either my sheep runs there or I'll fill your mouth full with my fist. And he clammed right up, just shut up like a drum, he did. I says, one or the two and he clammed right up . . .'

Opal watched the other men to learn what they thought of Quirl's boasting, and she would see them look swiftly at each other with disgust and hear them curse softly under their breath. Dock's face would darken as he listened to this tale or another, and sometimes he would rise suddenly and leave the house. 'I don't see how you can stand that chin music,' she said to him one evening after Quirl had gone home. 'I'd think it would drive you crazy.'

Dock began to mutter and to look for work to do. 'Wait till he opens his mouth to me in a way I don't like. Wait till he does, will you? He'll think hell's kicked him in the end.'

'In a way you don't like! Why, can't you see he's aimun all that boastun at you? Are you blind and can't see? Mag is just settun him on, that's all.'

'Wait till he opens his mouth to me, I say. I'll hit him so hard he won't never yeeep again.'

Opal wanted one of these men to give Quirl a terrible beating, and of this matter she spoke to Joe one noon. 'If I was a man I'd take him outside and whale the daylights out of him. He couldn't talk that way around me.'

‘You want him hit dood and thound?’ asked Joe, looking at her with surprise. ‘You want me to dive him a thound wallopun?’

‘You or any one. I’m sick of the way he talks and talks, and never a word from none but him. You’re a bright bunch of men, the whole lot of you.’

One evening, on the last day of threshing, Quirl was more eager and loud in telling tales of his courage and of other men’s cowardice. He told again of how Jack Nevel clammed right up, and of how a man in the valley carried two eyes blacker than Toby’s heel. ‘I never aimed hit him so hard, not a-tall, I never. He turned four summersets and never wiggled so long I thought he was dead. How come all that gall, I said, and with that I let loose plumb in his eye. He went down like a steer hit with a axe. Just dropped and never wiggled a toe for long enough time to crawl a mile on your hands and knees. How come, I said . . .’

On and on he talked, stopping to pick his teeth or to laugh his slinking laugh that was like a threat whining in terror. The other men ate in silence or glanced at him now and again with distrust. Standing by the stove or carrying food to the table, Opal watched them, searching their faces for some sign of patience about to break and wondering if they were as cowardly as they seemed to be. And when Quirl told again of how he had bullied Jack Nevel, Opal could endure his boasting no longer.

‘What business did you have to run your sheep on his place, I’d like to know! I’ll bet you won’t run

your sheep on this place, and there won't be no one or the two about it. You'll get all the daylights knocked clear out of you!' She stopped, trembling, staring with hatred at Quirl's long, ugly face. Then she looked at Dock and saw his mouth twitching, though whether with fear or rage she could not tell; and when she looked at Joe he was soberly watching her. He stood up, and Opal saw that his face was turning white.

'Damn your hide, anyway, dat's what I tink! Why run your old tattle on Dack's farm? If you run your tattle on my farm and tell me, do one or do two, I'll wallop your head dood and thound.'

There was a little silence, and then Quirl laughed his queer laugh, a series of dry panting sounds like those of a tired dog.

'I aim to be a good neighbor,' he said, his face sobering the instant he spoke. 'I'm easy to get along with. But when I'm tromped on I'm a reg'lar hyenee. I'm the worst kind when my Irish gets up.'

'Irish and hyenee don't tare me a-tall,' declared Joe, and went outside.

Autumn came again, long and dry and hard after the freshness and wet of summer, an open season that pushed the gray sky far away and set its horizon beyond the mountains. Opal could see for many miles through the clear thin air or she could look far up at a zenith that seemed to be high above the sun or moon. In regard to the seasons, said Dock, there had lately come to him an idea worth

writing down. No two autumns were alike, no two winters, as any man could tell, and in the cycle of dry years and wet years there was some kind of law and order which he was figuring out. Every third year or every seventh, or every year of some other number, would be so dry that a man would never get the dust off his teeth. Perhaps it was every third year, though upon this point he was still unconvinced. The summer of their coming here had been the driest he had ever known; the second had been wetter and the last one very wet. The next one would be very wet or very dry, and there was no sense in thinking about another kind. If he knew which it would be, he could plant wisely: only winter wheat if it was to be dry because spring wheat would stand little drouth. If it was to be wet, perhaps he would plant no winter wheat at all, or only a little, because none could expect wheat to come up in the earth now. Farmers down Antelope way were planting acres and acres in ground as dry as gunpowder, and they would be sorry fools if no rain came. And there was no sign of rain, not even the cry of an owl or the faintest sort of circle around the moon. Hype's corns had not hurt him for weeks now, and Mary had no ache in her jaw. It would be very unwise to plant winter wheat, but everywhere men were doing it, giving to it all their new ground and all the old ground they could plow. Andy Hansen had seeded Hansie's whole place, and Ed Wynn and Max Tibbetts. It was an unheard-of bunch of numskulls that God had sent to this country. . . .

Far away and near on the dry hills Opal could see the whitish stubble turning under or she could see the clouds of dust that followed harrows and drills. The smoke of her fire hugged the earth and each morning was faintly white with frost. Dock was hauling his grain out and bringing back each time a load of hay which he stacked behind the barn. Now and again he would bring Opal a few oranges or a red ribbon for her black hair or he would give her a tiny sack of cheap candy. Not in their three years of married life had he bought her any clothes, except a ribbon now and then or a pair of cotton stockings or of stout shoes. 'When I get set on my feet I aim give you some money to throw around. I aim to let you dress fit to kill.'

Without a word Opal took what he gave and asked for nothing. He was paying his debts, for the binder of last year and the team and for the plow and tank of the year before. Jad Thurginstowen, he said, was the only man down by the creek who was not planting winter wheat. Jad was a sight to make a man's eyeballs ache, with his unwashed black beard full of chaff and dirt and his hair matted in old sweat and his clothes ripped in shreds. The panes had all been broken from his shack, and with gunnysacks stuffed in the window holes Jad lived in the dark place within, more terrible with each new day and more alone. His horses were gaunt scarecrows with huge bony heads and bulging hip bones and a side of ribs like a washboard. They ate sagebrush, Dock imagined, because he could see no hay nor even straw,

and everybody down there was now drinking the yellowish water of Antelope Creek. What he drank was bad enough, God knew, with dead mice in it and the like, but it didn't run over rotten sheep and through Con Wote's corrals.

One evening, returning from the valley, he began to curse as soon as he came in sight, and Opal knew he was trying to work up a terrible rage over something. He crawled down from his hay, swearing and kicking at things and affecting great fury.

'Now, what is wrong?' asked Opal, a little amused; but he refused at once to say what was wrong. He unhitched and tended his team and strode wrathfully into the house. What was wrong, had he heard her ask? And what wasn't wrong, here or anywhere! The State was claiming all the unhomesteaded land and would lease it first and sell it when it became more valuable. 'That's all them-there big-bellied guys out Boise ever do. Anything for to make money for them and for a farmer to starve hisself gant-eyed. I'd like to kick that-air State land commissioner in his hind-end till his brain rattled,'

A man would lease a piece of ground and fence it and break it, and another fellow, perhaps a rich man, would come along and buy it, and for all his work the first man would get what the little boy shot at. That was the kind of system operating in Boise and elsewhere, as any fool could see with two eyes, and any farmer here worth his salt would grab a gun and shoot the first State man to show his face. Any farmer worth his salt would go down there and blow

Boise off the State. So he would, if he had time, just to give other men a chance at a decent life, just to show those fat-chopped fellows that they didn't own the whole world. That's what he would do, if he had the time, and if some man would lend him a gun or a stick of giant powder. He would practice marksmanship for a little while, and then he would search creation through for men who ought to be shot in their tracks or thrown into a river with a boulder tied around their necks. In the end, no doubt, he would be caught and hanged, but men who came after would not have to slave like a nigger to raise wheat and give the profit to fat fellows who never did an ounce of work in their lives. He would be going to Boise one of these days and he would be blowing the State Capitol into ten thousand smithereens. There wouldn't be left of it a piece big enough to write the Governor's name on. If the State Commissioner came snooping up here, he would knock him into the well and bury him under so deep that he would never come out, even on the day of resurrection.

'Oh, for the love of life!' cried Opal. 'Shut up your endless chin music! You won't never do a thing but stay right here and sweat your life out till you die. You won't never do a thing but that, not a thing in all your days.'

'You think I won't!' exclaimed Dock, his lips drawn in a grotesque snarl over his ugly teeth. 'Just go on thinkun I won't and see how right you be! I aim to do them very things I tell about ——'

'Oh, you don't either! What do you want to talk like a fool for?'

'That's what I aim,' said Dock, whetting his wrath. 'I don't never say a thing I don't aim to do the plumb finish. I'm sick and tired beun walked on and walked on by them-there men don't never do a day's work in a thousand year. I don't kallate to stand it enough longer to say about.'

'You'll just go on and sweat your life out here. You're even afraid of Quirl Avery. You're even afraid of him, I say.'

Dock did not answer, and Opal was a little alarmed by the way he looked at her. For a long while he was silent, staring at her, still staring through the gloom as night deepened around him. Then suddenly he rose and left the house.

VII

NOVEMBER was full of storm threats. Winds swept the frozen sky and cloud-mountains came after with thunder waking in their altitudes. Late in the month a rain came, a chill, drizzling rain that hung in the sky for many days and turned the hills to a smoky, wet darkness. December was a bleak, open month of bitter cold. Nights left great white frosts in the dawn, and at midday Opal could see long smooth banks of fog lying against the southern hills and fog like white smoke in coves. Dock took her to the valley, and on the day before Christmas she gave birth to her fourth child, a small starved babe that she named Ruby. Dock named her Frost. 'Dick and Bill and Em and Frost, them's our kids' names,' he said, and his teeth chattered while he hugged the stove.

Dawn of the new year was loud with winds that drove clouds of stinging snow over the hills or spun them in white cyclones down the vales. Out of the barn came the cold breath of animals, and chickens ran over the hard earth on frozen feet. When Dock entered the house, Opal could feel the coldness of him across the room, coldness that clung around him and was frozen into his clothes, that had run into his hands and was thawed out in ice water. Over the hill Mary was large with her seventh child and she was still cooped in a covered wagon, on the

iron of which there would be scales of frost and there would be a sheet of frost glistening on the canvas top. Inside with her three small ones she would be striving to keep alive, striving to shut out the bitter death of winter. Hype had talked of moving to the valley until spring, but at the last moment he had changed his mind. He would be homeless, he said, wherever he went, and a covered wagon was as good in one place as another. Next year he would build a house or he would be on the move again, going God knew where and why.

Dock kept the stove red-hot day and night, but across the room water froze solid in a pail and on the boards near the door frost grew in tiny spires. The earth outside was so hard that Opal could hear his footfalls between the house and barn. She dared not imagine the pain that Mary was suffering. Mary's stove, she remembered, was a small thing with only two lids, and the only door to her wagon would be a blanket. Often Dock went over to learn how they were enduring the cold, and when he returned his face would be very sober and for a long while he would not speak. 'How is Mary?' Opal would ask and Dock would mutter in his breath. 'Let's have them over here. We can make out some way.' But eleven people, he said, could not live in two rooms and he tried to look at the sky through panes that for three weeks had been opaque with frost.

In the middle of January the cold became more terrible and drove deeper into the heart of life.

Many of the chickens, Dock said, had frozen to death and now lay in the yard like chunks of feathered stone, and in spite of all he could do his horses were losing flesh. The bleak sky lifted away to new heights. The raw morning air stung like a burn. Bare aspens looked like naked dead things and even the foliage of sagebrush began to turn yellowish and die. At night the stars were glittering points of cold and the moon was a floating crescent of white ice.

One morning Dock went over the hill to see Hype and his family, and with a knife Opal scraped frost from a pane and watched him go. Soon he came back, running, and burst into the house more excited than she had ever seen him. 'God a-mighty!' he cried and seemed to be looking for something that he would never find. 'God a-mighty!' he cried again, and before Opal could learn what was wrong he dived outside. She quickly put on a coat and followed, but the bitter cold took her breath and she came back. Through her small hole in the pane's frost she saw him hitch a team to the wagon and saw him go over the hill and out of sight. Soon he returned and with him he had Mary and her children and behind the wagon Hype trotted and beat his body with his long arms or he jumped and turned around and around in a crazy way and kicked his toes against the earth.

Mary's child was born dead, a tiny thing so starved and ghastly quiet that Opal was filled with

shuddering sickness whenever she thought of it. Dock began preparations to take it out to a cemetery in the valley, but Hype said such a trip would be nonsense. He would bury it here, out on the hills somewhere, over on an uncultivable corner of his place or in another spot of no worth. People had to die, and one sleeping place was as good as another. There was no earthly use in being silly about the matter, about a dead baby least of all, because the world was full of dead things. Anyway, people ere long would need a cemetery here, for they would all starve to death before they got sense enough to leave this place of sage and dust and winters that shrieked with death. And with terrible jest he added that Mary herself would fill a graveyard of ordinary size before she would be done with having kids. This was the fourth to which she had given a still birth. On a Wyoming desert was one and there was another now lost somewhere in the mountains near Jackson's Hole. There was something wrong with Mary, he said; something unearthly and strange and terrifying. They would bury it here, then, Dock said, and Hype declared there was no need to get in a big hurry. There was no need to go out and freeze to death while this bitter cold was upon the earth. A dead baby was beyond pain and the need of care and about dead things he refused to get silly and lose his head. Opal deliberated his words and looked at Mary's thin white face and the mute suffering in her horrified eyes. And when she went to Mary and asked what should be done, Mary said quietly that Hype's wish was her wish.

So Hype wrapped the child in a white sheet and laid it away in the coldest part of the house. Outside, during the short grayness of days and the long loneliness of nights glittering with cold, the wild winds shrieked and moaned endlessly around the gables or they drove clouds of snow over the frozen earth. Inside, the terrible silence was rarely broken by words, and these people living in the presence of death listened day-long and night-long to the winds hunting through the sky. Mary's two oldest children with wondering faces hugged round her bed or they stood by the stove and stared up at their father's face or at Opal's or at Dock's. Now and then one of them, a boy of five, would look into the cold bedroom where the dead child lay, and Opal wondered what strange thoughts were in his mind. Dock chewed tobacco, spitting his juice everywhere, and Hype smoked, or they would talk a little, one speaking briefly and the other answering with a word. During the day, when she was not cooking or caring for her children, Opal would sit by Mary's side and hold her thin hands streaked with purple veins and she would strive to comfort her. Mary had not wept, would never weep again, Opal thought, but in her eyes were such horror and pain that Opal would glance at them and shudder and look away. She was a little afraid of Mary, afraid of the momentary flash of wild insanity in her eyes, of the way Mary's breath sometimes caught in her throat.

Mary wanted her child, she whispered to Opal one

day, wanted to cradle it against her breast for only a little while. But when Opal spoke of the matter to Dock he looked at her with such horror in his eyes that she recoiled.

'God a-mighty, Ope!' he muttered and stared at Mary. 'Don't you know that-air kid's froze hard as a bullet! That-air kid's liken a rock.'

And when Opal returned to the bed, she met Mary's mute appeal by putting her arms around her and touching her lips lightly to Mary's white face. 'You'll have to wait a little,' she whispered. 'You'll have to wait a day or two yet.'

When in bed with Dock, Opal said in his ear: 'Can't she have it just a little bit? Sometime? She just wants to touch it like. She ain't never touched it, you know.'

But Dock muttered terrible oaths that expressed his grief and horror. 'No, Ope. It would be liken a rock on her heart, a cold rock. God a-mighty, Ope, no!'

Sometimes in the stillness of night Mary would sit up with a little cry, and Opal would rise in her bed on the floor and see Mary staring into the bedroom where her dead child was frozen in a white sheet. After a while Hype would pull Mary down to the bed and Opal would be terrified by a choking sound in Mary's throat. 'Dock!' she would whisper in his ear, cold shudders running over her flesh. 'Dock, wake up!' But Dock would only groan and turn in his sleep, and outside the winds would beat upon the house as Opal lay and thought of Mary's

eyes, staring at the ceiling, and of the agony in Mary's heart

After ten days of silence and horror a great cloud came over the sky, shutting away the cold altitudes, and snow fell. Out into a blizzard like broken lances of steel Dock and Hype went to dig a grave somewhere on the hills. As soon as they were gone, Mary again asked for her child and Opal got the cold little bundle and laid it in Mary's arms. For several minutes she held it without moving and then she drew the sheet back and touched her lips to the frozen face. She said it could now be taken away, but when Opal reached for the child Mary's arms tightened in a convulsive hug. With her eyes closed she held it against her heart for another minute and then she spoke and Opal took the child away.

When Hype and Dock returned, they made a little coffin of a grocery box, lining it inside with an old cotton blanket and attaching a lid with leather hinges. Mary's oldest son stood close by, watching with sober eyes all that was done; stumbling out of his father's way as he stared up at his face or staring at the small bundle which Hype had put into the box. Mary lay silent with her eyes closed, but when everything was ready for the burial she called Opal to her and asked her to go out with the men. She wanted Opal to mark the spot. Storms would bury the grave under and winds might wear the mound away before she could find it. Men cared little enough about these things.

Opal wrapped warmly and went, leaving her children in Mary's bed. Into the storm Hype led the way, the box upon his shoulder, and at the woodpile Dock got two sharpened stakes. The blizzard of snow, more dense and swift now, came down from a gray sky in swirling eddies and tornadoes of white and was swept by on loud winds. There was a steady roaring in Opal's ears and an eddy of sound about her head. The wind pierced her clothes and went over her body like ice and it struck her face with the sharp sting of flame. The torn and scattered sky looked like a cold gray fog through which clouds of frost had been driven and upon which, far above, a wan moon had dropped its frozen light.

Upon a wind-swept hill Hype rested for a few moments, a dark figure in the gloom, and Dock and Opal came up. No one spoke. Over the hard earth at their feet the snow was being driven in gliding waves, lost in white piles behind bushes or in holes, formed in a broken line along an old trail, and lifted in gray clouds and carried out over vales and other hills and beyond. Everywhere the wind shrieked or whistled or moaned: shrieked over the wide reach of desert, whistled among naked brush and aspen trees, and fell away into moanings as it broke over a hill and dropped into a harbor of quiet. When she faced it, Opal could feel the wind searching swiftly through her clothes, and against her back she could feel an eddy of cold air between the two streams that went by on either side. Hype shouldered his burden and went forth to another

hill and stopped by a black hole in the earth. It had been chopped out with an axe and its walls were dark and smooth as steel. It was not deep, not more than three feet, and its bottom was white with snow that had blown in. It was not deep enough, Opal whispered to Dock, but she heard only the chattering of her teeth. 'Coyotes will dig it up!' she cried, clutching his arm that reached for a shovel. 'Coyotes will dig it up next spring.' Hype fell upon his knees and lowered the box into the grave. 'Hype, that ain't deep enough!' she cried to him as he took the shovel from Dock. But Hype shoveled the earth in and the frozen chunks dropped with a hollow sound upon the lid. When the work was finished there was no mound, as Opal thought there would be, nothing but some chunks that were a little above the earth's level. Dock tried to drive a stake at the head of the grave, another at its foot, and Hype said he might as well try to drive the stakes into iron. The grave would be all right; he knew the spot, and when spring came he would mark it.

The men gathered their tools and turned homeward and Opal looked for signs by which she could recognize this place. The storm around her was so thick that she could see only a few yards away, but near was a serviceberry bush and to a limb Opal tied her handkerchief. After going a little way she looked back, but already the grave had vanished in the blizzard sweeping over it. At a cove she stopped again, searching for some tree which she might recognize when in leaf, for some bush that grew

apart. Memories of trees and bushes and hills she carried back with her, but they were memories of naked things in midwinter and she doubted that she or Hype or any one else would ever find the grave again. It was already completely lost somewhere, out in the loneliness of the night and the storm. Coyotes would know its spot and all the cold stars of the sky would look down upon it and it would always be under the winds and the rains. It was a tiny spot of death, now drawn into the desolate heart of these hills, and for Opal it came to be a symbol of what must happen to all who remained here. This country had conquered its first, a baby born dead in the terrible cold of winter, and it would conquer more. The winds and the storm were the searching hunger of death, of a death prowling everywhere, that in winter time stiffened life with its bitter cold and that in summer time choked it with its high and passionless drouth. Silent and helpless she seemed to herself to be, all people here seemed to be, among these pitiless solitudes that spoke only when their hunger went forth to torture and kill.

As long as snowfall and cold endured, Hype and his family lived in Dock's house. The gray days and long nights were broken at first only now and then by a word or by the fret of children. Mary's three were sickly ones with pale faces and thin bodies meagerly covered by ragged clothes. The two oldest caught one bad cold after another, and would huddle

by the stove or scamper to chairs and sit forlornly when their father spoke to them. 'Wipe your nose,' Hype would say. 'Wipe your nasty nose before I twist it off your face.' At the table they would timidly wait for food, and Hype would exclaim: 'Now what do you want? Don't you ever get your bellies full?' And Opal would hasten to serve them and she would gently pat their heads.

When in bed she and Dock would murmur of Hype's brutal words and ways. He was so unlike the Hype of last summer, Opal whispered, so full of meanness now and so empty of happy song; and Dock said there was something eating Hype's heart out, a great and strange guilt on his mind. There was something in his past of which he was ashamed; something terrible and always with him. What it was no man would ever say and Hype least of all. In this time of year he hated his children for some reason, for some bitter reason, and he seemed to hate his wife. He was a queer man, a homeless and unhappy man under his song, as queer a man as any God had made. But he was a likable man, too, generous to a fault, and as quick as a flash to give all that he had and to ask nothing in return.

Dock hauled straw from the field for his cows and Opal could see them licking up the brittle stems or thrusting their noses into snow and eating it. Snow was now used for water in the house and Dock would also melt enough for the chickens and for Eagle, his favorite horse. Hype's horses for months had been foraging over the hills, but after the last

snowfall he had turned them into Dock's straw-stack. It was the first time in all his days, he said, that his horses had been forced to explore barren hills in winter time or eat straw. For a certainty he was going from bad to worse and he gave himself another year, or perhaps two, in which to starve utterly to death. He was a little sick of life, of dragging from one fruitless spot to another; sick of seeing his children thin for want of enough to eat.

And Dock said he was a little weary, too; but he could endure it all, or at least he would not complain, if other men were not growing fat on his labor. The only necessary man in the world was the farmer, and it was he who got least for his work. It was the farmer who worked eighteen hours a day for less than enough to keep body and soul together, for less than enough to feed his kids, let alone to educate them. It was an unjust and ungodly world, he knew, even if he never lived another day, and he would die knowing little more. And sometimes he would curse the men who were running the world to 'rock and ruin'; or on another day he would talk of his dreams.

The man worth his salt was the man who never gave up, no matter what, and for his part he would never yield. If Hype had so little grit he might as well get out, might as well pack up and leave when spring broke, because this country had no need of his kind. This country needed men who would never say die, men who would turn this place into fields of gold. Worse spots than this had been con-

quered by men; worse trials than these had been endured by them. His father had faced sterner hardships, starved to the very marrow of his bones, and until the end of his days he had been a pioneer on new frontiers. He had never yeeped, not once in his long life.

And Dock would never yeep, he said, not if he starved until his ribs rattled when he walked and his lean jaws wore his hide through. He would be a pretty sight for sure if he turned tail like a whipped pup and went valleyward, leaving these hills to be conquered by better men. He would die of disgrace if he ever did that. His old man would turn over in his grave and stand up and swear. 'I aim to conquer this-herẽ place or I aim to die. God give a man ways to conquer it if he'll only find them. I'll figger them ways. There ain't no reason to quit, Hype, not a reason a man could say about.'

There was no food in the house now but bread and potatoes, and when these were set, Dock would look at Hype and speak. 'It ain't much to eat, but me and Ope, we never had a thing first year but bread and water gravy. Did we, Ope? And my old man once lived on boiled coyote hides for a whole month. God a-mighty, you don't know what it is to have your bones shaken in your hide.'

'The hell I don't,' said Hype.

'Sure you don't.'

Lem Higley came over once in a long while and talked and gurgled his insincere laughs, but more and more he was so rarely spoken to or understood

that his chatter would fall away into yawns and lost words. He had other strange tales to tell, but no one, except Mary's oldest child, would turn his interest to yarns in this bitter season. The child would listen with open mouth, and Lem after a little would talk to him or he would say that he must trot home and get his supper. He was never asked to eat here because he was too greedy and food was too scarce.

Dock and Hype often went upon the river to catch trout through the ice, and one cold evening Opal went with them to escape for a few hours the hopeless weariness of things inside. With burlap sacks wrapped around their feet, the men tramped over a frozen trail, one of them carrying an axe, the other a sack to fetch the fish in, and Opal rode behind upon a horse. The sky was clear and glittering with stars and the earth lay in billows of cold white. Aspen trunks were ashen and along the river silver birches gleamed. They went upon a large eddy and Hype gathered wood for a fire while Dock cut round holes in the ice. From a warm slough they had got muckets for bait. They fished with short lines attached to sticks, steadily moving their lines up and down through the holes. After a little while their holes would freeze over and with their poles they would break the new ice, or on their lines would freeze a sheath of ice and they would bring them to the fire to melt it off. Opal kept warm by the flames, piling wood upon them and watching the snow and ice melt and run into dark water. Now

and then one of the men would pull out a trout and toss it upon the snow, and it would flop about there for a long while before lying still. And even then, she learned, it was not dead, because when she picked it up to put it into the sack it lashed with its tail and writhed in her hands.

The mountains across the way were great white solitudes on whose backs ran lines of forest and in whose flanks were patches of maples and cedars. Down the narrow, unfrozen part of the river came a steady current of slush ice, crunching among its parts, grinding along the ice banks, and flowing endlessly around a dark bend and out of sight. The men would fish with one hand and beat the other against breast or thigh, and they would trot around their holes in a futile effort to warm their feet. Once Dock cursed loudly because he had lost a trout too big for his hole. He got the axe and chopped his hole larger, swearing meanwhile or increasing in repeated telling the size of the trout's head. It had been as big as his hand and was next as big as two hands and then as large as a man's hat. It would weigh five pounds or eight pounds or ten pounds. Hype cut a hole nearer the water's edge and Dock called to him: 'You won't ketch nery fish out there! The mush ice is drove under there! No man ever ketched nery fish out there since rivers run.'

Dock came over to the fire to thaw out and he wooed Opal a little, kissing the back of her neck and pinching her hips.

'Stop that spoonun!' cried Hype, coming back to

his first hole. 'Help get some more something to eat or we'll all starve to death while it's too damn cold to be buried. Keep that spoonun for to-night, for hell sake.'

'You're just jealous because you ain't got no woman here to spoon,' said Dock, and he pranced absurdly around Opal, a loose sack on his foot striking into the flames. 'You're just jealous, damn your skin!'

'Hey, stop that! Let's hurry and get done before my bald head freezes plumb off of my neck. There's a lot little icicles runnun through my blood now. There's a icicle freezun right to the end my nose.'

'Stick your tongue out and thaw it offen your nose then, you damn fool. Stick your tongue out ——'

Opal pushed him away from the heat and with a firebrand chased him back to his stick and line. 'You're silly enough,' she told him, not wholly displeased. 'You're silly enough, Heaven knows.'

She could hear Dock telling something to Hype, a few words now and then of what he was saying, and she felt a wave of shame. It was terrible, she thought, the way men discussed their women with other men, and, for that matter, the way women discussed their men with other women. It was as if they were oppressed by vulgar intimacies too many to be hidden. There was Jane Bodley in the valley who would talk for hours to any one who would listen of the most intimate ways her man had: how and where he kissed her and the way of his hands

and the unreasonable hours at which he would awake and turn to her.

Opal could not understand such women and such men. Picking up a flaming stick she threw it at Dock and cried: 'Shut up that nasty mouth of yours, will you! Shut it up before I come and fill it full of ashes and fire.' Under her feet she heard a long splitting sound as if the ice were being wrenched asunder and over by the river's edge ghostly rafts of ice were flowing endlessly. A fish flopped and then moved its tail up and down. Opal went to it and found it freezing in a sheath of ice, its lidless upturned eye glittering like a tiny pool of cold. Dock's words came again, and again she cried: 'Shut up that foul mouth! Talk about something decent for a change.'

'He's nasty as a pig, ain't he?' called Hype. 'He keeps a big blush on my face all time I'm around him. He keeps me red as a beet.'

There were now eleven fish in the sack, and of these Hype had caught nine. On their last trip out he had caught all but one and Dock had been loud with silly excuses, talking for an hour of fishermen and their ways. He had never seen a man of any worth who could catch fish. There was Jim Chase of the valley, a better farmer than the best of them, and he had never caught a fish in a thousand trials. With spinners and minnows and worms, or with flies and grasshoppers, he would fish side by side in the same hole with other men, and the only thing he had ever caught, to tell the whole truth, was a her-

ring. On the other hand, there was Jess Cheeney, a worthless noddy, who could catch fish from a well. He could catch fish from a pond in which there had been nothing for ages but pollywogs and snakes. . . .

The bushes along the river's bank were bowers of white with dark holes under them full of winter silences. In these black cold places, Opal thought, things of the summer hid away, locusts and stinkbugs and butterflies. Darning-needles, too, those swift creatures with wings of gauze. When mosquitoes were rare, these needles sewed up people's mouths, she had heard, or sometimes sewed an eye shut while one slept. She had known a man with a drooping eyelid that he could never raise and she had been told that a darning-needle had sewed the lid down. Before a doctor could cut the thread loose, the lid had been paralyzed and would never lift again. All of this she only half believed; believed it in half because she had known of other things as strange. She had known of the skunk's way and of the stinkbug's. If a skunk once shot its vile scent on a man, his skin would turn brown like the brown of a birthmark and the stain could never be washed away. The negro's offensive odor, she had been told, was that of the stinkbug, and the black man had got it long ago in far-away Africa by worshiping the hideous thing which down there grew as big as a hen's egg. Both of these were very strange things, but not too strange in a world of darning-needles and snakes that grew from a horse's tail thrown into a pond and lightning that destroyed a cow's cud. . . .

For several minutes, while Opal's mind had been considering these things, Dock and Hype had moved their poles up and down, stooping now and then to break ice from their lines or to peer in search of fish.

'I can see whole wads fish in that-air hole,' said Dock, peering now and holding a lighted match.

Hype looked and said he could see none. 'I surmise we've caught about all there is,' he said, and after dropping his line in again he began to sing. Loud echoes went off into the night and broke against the black stone wall of the mountain and came down in shrill whinings, scattering fragments of sound. Dock told him to stop in Heaven's name or he would scare all the fish away.

'Oh, I love that gal, that gal loves me,
A hoopety doodle de doodle de dee!
Oh, I says to her, here's all my love,
Oh, a whoopety doopety hoopety dove!'

This silly improvising and others like it he sang over and over, to old melodies or to those of his own making, his voice delivering great bursts of sound as he steadily moved his pole or sinking to mournful tones as he stooped to see if his hook was still baited. And not a little to her shame, when for a moment she became aware, Opal would repeat his words and his melody in an under-breath humming or her body would respond to his rhythm. And after a while Dock strove to sing, too, breaking forth suddenly and astonishing himself into a long silence, and again venturing with less sound. His efforts silenced Opal and left her meditating the quality of

the two voices. Hype's was clear and tuneful, with leapings of sound and soft murmurings, but Dock's was like the noise of a mill saw ripping through a knot. He would struggle with Hype's tunes and choke them and then his voice would discover itself in a victorious shout. Hype's lines of sense Dock would repeat and his nonsense syllables he would ignore. From one tune to another he would follow, and when a little sense of failure came upon him he would be silent for a while, futilely busy with his hook.

To their mood of foolish gayety Opal responded and at all the things around her she looked with serener eyes: at the endless flowing horror of ice and black water, at the cold black ledges rising above the river, at the naked bent cottonwoods and the bushes full of dark silences, and at the canyon beyond running high and far into the bitter solitude of night. It was not her way to be happy in a world frozen like stone to its heart, but no one could cherish his depression around Hype. He and his ceaseless nonsense were like a sun moving among clouds and scattering them to the invisible parts of the sky. Why Mary loved him, why she clung to him against all sense and reason, was easy to be seen. About such men there was a strange allurements that women found good in the face of all the evil and neglect which it fostered and brought to birth.

'Oh, sheep on the mountains, a wagon near by,
Just twiddle your old thumb for a minute!
Let rain and destruction skoot over the sky,
But my wagon's got a fine woman in it!'

For a long while, tending the fire and on her way home, these lines and their melody possessed her mind, and time and again she caught herself humming the tune, saying the words. They were silly words, she thought, and the tune was a silly tune, like all of Hype's words and tunes. But they haunted her, brought to her a cheerfulness that was not in harmony with the world about, with her memory of things at home. Before her as she rode she held the sack, and through it she could feel the cold dead fish whose eyes would be wide open and staring. She could hear the men behind her, crunching on the frozen trail. Everything died with its eyes open, as if to have a last look at all the things it was leaving, as if to look upward as it sank into death. Mary's baby had died this way, but its eyes had been closed, gently, as if to shut away the cold horror of the grave. Hype was calling to Dock and Dock would stop for a moment to answer, and from time to time when Opal looked back she would see him spit a stream of brown juice over the snow. Among her thoughts, bringing confusion to them, were the lines of Hype's song and under her breath all the while was the warm melody of it.

'Let rain and destruction skoot over the sky,
But my wagon's got a fine woman in it!'

She fell to wondering about the twiddling of thumbs, what it was and the sense of such silliness; and withdrawing her mitten she moved her thumb in all possible ways as if to recognize twiddling if by

any chance she achieved it. Other like things of which Hype had spoken now and then, perplexed her mind. A man in the valley, he had said, was always hands down when there was any work to be done, and he had known a woman who lobbed with her knees, whatever this could mean. He spoke of himself as rusting in his swivel joints and of Mary as flopping her stomach on its back, and of Lem Higley he said there was a squint in his tales. On the other hand, Dock said the heat would swivel up his crop, and he said there was only a squint of water in a cup when he meant there was only a drop or two. Both of them had many queer ways of saying things. Dock would say, 'I'm joobus it'll rain,' when he was afraid a storm was coming; and Hype would say, 'I can do it on my two hands,' when he meant only that he could do it. And even now Hype was calling: 'There ain't another lick of snow in the world's eye this year!' and Dock was answering: 'Them clouds is plumb gutted for the driest spell you ever see.' After a little considering, Opal supposed they meant there would be no more snow until another season.

And there was none, nothing but a few scattered bits as if the sky were being cleared for a long summer of drouth. It had been an open winter, barren and cold, and so little snow had come that a few high ridges had been kept naked by the winds. For spring wheat the earth's wet would be too scant, if no rain came, and ere August it would burn yellow

and waste away. What was the sense, then, Opal asked, of planting wheat at all; but to plant and to hope, Dock said, was the only way a man had. It might be a wet summer or it might be a dry summer, and none but God could say now. Of things like this no man could speak. If he wanted to work and hope, why, that was one way for a man; and if he wanted to sit idly by, why, that was a way, too, and for it there would always be Lem Higleys. He'd rather waste his seed and his labor than to yield an inch to this lonely desert, now shedding itself of a pale spring; he'd rather go out and sweat himself down to the size of a Tom Thumb than to let the weeds, the mustards and thistles, overrun his fields.

And so early and late he plowed and harrowed and sowed his grain; and little by little the sky grew more passionless and remote as everywhere the things of earth foretold a season of drouth. Only a few wild flowers came in this spring and they were soon gone. A thunderstorm shuddered over the hills in late April and the grass for a little while was a more vivid green.

Not often, but as frequently as she could, Opal went over to visit Mary, now living again in her wagon and again searching for lovely things: for wild flowers and wild birds and for the young green of things that came late into leaf; for the shadows of clouds upon aspen groves and for cloud shadows flowing over the hills. And one day Opal went with her to find the grave of her son. When they came upon it, after a long search, they found a hole dug

in one end, by a coyote or a wolf, and into the hole had run the melting snows of spring. The coffin was naked to the air along one side and into its cracks everywhere visible the mud had run and dried, and around its exposed end there must have been a pool of mud a long while, for now on the side of the grave and on the end of the coffin there were ridges of mud which had marked the various levels of the pool. They filled the hole with soft earth and over the grave they built a smooth neat mound.

Mary was very sober but untearful, and Opal was a little surprised by the quiet dignity with which she worked. Which was the head and which was the foot, Mary asked; and Opal said she did not know, that no one could tell now. Perhaps Hype would know; but more likely, Mary said, he would not. The head ought to have been laid to the east, because it was in such a way that all people were buried nowadays. Mary could not say why. Perhaps it was only a foolish custom, or perhaps it was that people might see the sun first of all things when they again rose from the dust. To be placed with one's head westward would be, somehow, too much like being abandoned to an eternity of sleep. To the south she might lie in peace, but never to the north or west.

Of this Mary talked quietly and of another matter, of being buried alive. Ever since childhood she had been haunted by this thought, in horrible nightmares when asleep and in a thousand and one ways when awake. Times without number she had

dreamed of being buried alive, only to awake in a cold sweat to Hype's ridicule; and in the odd hours of her conscious life she had tried to imagine what such an experience would be like, to catch the full horror of it in the dreadful moment when the mind would break and go mad. All this was very silly, and no doubt it had grown out of things she had seen when a child. She had seen boys, in the cruel way of their kind, torture things to death, and she had seen them bury things alive. Putting out the eyes of birds to let them wing blind and lost into the tallest sky; nailing woodchucks to a plank and cutting them open to watch their hearts beat; severing the legs of weasels at their knees and then pursuing them with cats — these she had seen, but they had been only mild cruelties in comparison with others that boys had done. For she had once seen three boys nail a stray and forlorn dog into a box and bury it alive. She had run screaming for help, but none had been near, and after her cries had sent the frightened boys homeward, she had put her ear to the grave and had heard the muffled sounds of terror and death. And to Opal now she confided the secret joy that had been hers when Hype had refused to bury the child at once. He had refused, not because of the cold, but because he knew it was her wish, and it had been this way with her other sons. When she felt its frozen body, hard as stone, she knew it was dead and that she would not be haunted by fears of its waking somewhere out on these lonely hills. All this was very silly, she said with a faint smile, but

such was the way that terrible things had bred into her and she had no other.

At either end of the grave, on a later day, they drove a stake and on the one at the east Mary inscribed in pencil this legend:

Clyde Hunter

Born and Died

Jan. 18, 1909.

VIII

EVERYWHERE over these hills now Opal could see the dust of plows and harrows, and she knew that a farmer here or another there was planting wheat in the dry earth. Some of the farms she could recognize, and little by little she added to her knowledge of places and names, gathering it from Dock's words until her mind was full and rich with all that she knew of these people and their ways. The slope of yellowish stubble two miles southwest was Ed Wynn's farm, and Ed it was who had planted pine trees in his front yard and who boiled the Antelope water before he would drink it. Ed was a sandyish man with a red face and his wife was large and mirthful. Far up on the southern mountain-side, checkered among groves of aspens, was the farm of Perg Jasper, a dark fellow who hated mountains above all else and who talked, whenever an ear would listen, of the broad green fields of Illinois. Ere he died, he said, he would go back to Illinois, and once there not all the tribes of Moab could drive him away. That was a queer manner of declaring himself, Opal thought, and wondered who Moab was. 'That's what he said,' Dock told her. 'And I'll bet sixty he don't know Moab from Adam. He's just a plain city man.'

Five miles to the west was a dark ridge that marked the place of Jim McHenry, a small wiry

fellow whose two grandfathers were Irishmen and one of whose grandmothers was a Blackfoot squaw. Opal had never seen Jim, but from Dock she had gathered much uncertain knowledge of his ways. He talked endlessly and smoked and seemed to thrive on black coffee. Mrs. McHenry Opal had once seen, a tall gaunt Danish woman whose face was a sad and wrinkled record of tragedy and loss. On another farm, clinging to the southern hillsides, was Susan Hemp, the bony old maid who lived darkly alone and worked like a man in the fields. Of her Opal tried to imagine the secret and the lonely ways, the silent vigils in long winters and the desolate emptiness of her house. Dock said Susan was a sight fit to send a man blind or a train off its track. But he never made clear what was so terrible about Susan Hemp, and Opal resolved some day to learn.

Across the river, and visible only from the long dugway that led down, was the home of Charley Wheaton, a man who had lived here for years before Dock came. He had thirty acres, or perhaps forty, walled in by mountains on three sides and banked by the river on the south. He raised a little hay and he had a tiny orchard and garden which he watered from a mountain stream, but for the most part he lived in an eddy of idle years, slaying a bear now and then and bringing it home for food or sitting for hours upon the river to fish and catching little. Between starvation and freezing he led a calm and apparently happy life, from all Opal could learn,

though Mrs. Wheaton, like Mrs. McHenry, was a woman whom tragedy had driven into hopeless silence. To this lonely spot he had come many years ago, when his wife had been a lovely bride, and it was here that they had lived for twenty years.

All these people Opal wanted to know, their strange ways and the loneliness of their lives, but no road led by upon which they ever traveled, and it was not until much later that she knew them and guessed vaguely at their secrets. She sometimes wondered if all spots on earth were inhabited by people as strange as these, and as she thought of the matter she seemed to understand that each life is a mysterious thing, shut away in a tiny lonely world of its own. This was the way with herself and with Mary and with all the people whom she knew best. Even the strangeness of Dock grew as the years went by.

The Averys had moved out for the winter, and in May they returned, bringing with them Quirl's paternal grandparents. These two very old people became for Opal the strangest of all. After Antelope Creek dwindled to a foul trickle, Dock hauled water from the river, and when going with him, as she often did, Opal would see Grandma Avery huddled in her black rags, sitting out in front of Quirl's one-room shack, or she would see Grandpa Avery walking slowly over the hills, disappearing as if frightened into a clump of trees and emerging with backward looks and a little increase of his walk.

'He's crazy as a hooten owl,' declared Dock,

watching the old man with contented interest. 'Crazy as a horse been turpentine.' While wondering what a turpentine horse was, Opal watched Grandpa go over a ridge and out of sight. There was lunacy, Dock said, in the whole Avery outfit, as any man with half an eye could see. Quirl Avery was a loonytick and his father was not enough better to say about. It was his father who had once run wild and woolly after another woman and got one of his eyes knocked out for all his trouble. Tim Avery, by some hook or crook, was a trifle better, though he too had his crazy fits in which he didn't talk an ounce of sense in a whole ton of 'plaver.'

'Somehow or rather that old man Avery don't know what to do with hisself. He's wearun his skinny legs off, a-chasun over these hills liken he was a goner. I see him down on the river other day. Talkun to beat the fiddlesticks and to not a livun thing in sight.' It would seem, Dock said, as if all the crazy people of the world must come to Antelope before they were done with it. It was enough, God knew, to have a Lem Higley here and a Hansie Hansen, puking and howling in a double knot over his stomach, and a Tee Wynn making faces at the stars and twiddling his thumbs, and a Susan Hemp with a face like the skinned head of a donkey. All these were enough without dragging the Avery bunch up here. The Bryans of Annis would be coming up next, the craziest lot for a God's fact that ever used a gun to shoot a father down in cold blood. Had she ever heard of the Bryans?...

Young Tim Bryan upon a time years ago had got one of his hell-benting mad fits and had shot his father. In the next year he had been sent to the crazy house at Blackfoot, where he died, after odds and ends of queer deeds. Now that he remembered, though, Tim had not shot the old man at all, but had laid his head open with an axe, when they were crossing the desert out west of Camas. And Jess Bryan had been little better; a sneak-thief and a drunkard he was and had been in jail more times than a man could count. And Matt Bryan, an old maid daughter she was, with a terrible Roman nose, had run off with a married man and was now living somewhere with a bastard son. And strange to say, Jane Bryan, another daughter, had married Dock's brother, and she seemed to be a level-headed woman with no crazy rigmaroles of conduct.

The Bryan family was the craziest in the world, but among his own people there was a mad lot. The Campbells. There was Tommy who called himself 'Tommy Tamel, the fightun tiddo,' and there was Jeb who got drunk and prowled endlessly in search of scraps. There was Rob, another ugly fighter, who one night at a dance had fought a young man from Menan and had chewed his thumb clear off at the first joint.

'He chawed it off and spit it out, and me and some guys picked it up to looken it. And that-air Menan fellow bawled liken a baby.'

'Didn't his thumb ever grow back on? Did he go home without his thumb?'

'Grow back on!' cried Dock, looking at her pityingly. 'Why, God, no, he never see his thumb again. We throwed it away. We just looked at it and throwed it away.'

And there was Burns Campbell, the titan of them all, and Dock's second-cousin, to tell the truth. It was Burns who had once got under the belly of a thousand-pound horse and lifted it off the earth and turned it around on his back like a top. He would tie a halter rope around his upper arm and snap it in two when he bulged his muscle, or he would bend a forty-penny spike with the ease that other men bent a barbed wire. They were all powerful men, drunkards all, too, for that matter, but it was Tommy the fightun tiddo who was the craziest of the lot. With his belly full of gin he was as mad as a hatter and would do all kinds of unheard-of things. Once he drove his team headlong off a canal bridge and was so nearly drowned that for a month he lost all power of speech, and on another time he ambushed a girl who would not marry him and flogged her black and blue with a hamestrap. . . .

On and on he talked of these people, of his relatives and others, and Opal listened eagerly to his words. There was unmistakable pride in his voice and she realized vaguely that he was glad of his power to hold her interest. Now and then, after a little silence, she would ask a question to prompt his thought and to his tales he would return with new eagerness.

When they came, with their tank of water, past Quirl's shack, they both stared at Grandma Avery, sitting much as they had last seen her with withered hands folded on her lap and with her almost sightless eyes looking far away over the hills. Near her chair was a sack of rags from which she had been weaving a rug and a short way off on another chair was a glass of something that looked like clabbered milk. Old people, Dock said to Opal's words of wonder, had to eat clabbered stuff and cottage cheese and curd and they had to drink whey, all because their stomachs had played out. He rested his team for a few moments that he and Opal might see more and Opal spoke a word of greeting to the old woman; but she gave no answer, nothing more than an incurious glance, and there was no feeble stir of life visible in her black clothes. The terrible ugliness of her made Opal shudder a little, made her thoughts go swiftly to the far end of her life when she, too, would be an old hag, almost forgotten and waiting for death.

'Drive on,' she said.

'Wait till I see a little more.'

'I said drive on!'

Upon a hill Opal looked back and saw Grandma like a dark shapeless blur against the glimmering aspen walls of the house.

On a day early in July, Mag Avery again framed herself in Opal's doorway, with the same posture and the same sober scrutiny of her former appearance.

'Well, I see you're still here,' she said, and marched largely into the room. She looked around her for a few moments and then said: 'I see you are still here. . . . Lands of goodness, you don't mean to tell me you aready got another brat!'

Opal faced her, angry, baffled, wondering what could now be the devilish intent of this woman.

'Do tell, is that kid yourn, or do my eyes bewitch me!'

'And what if it is, I'd like to know!'

'And you only a chit of a thing, a wee slip, if I do say it.' Mag sat down, and into the room stealthily came her two sons, little fellows who were sober miniatures of their father, with the same large ears stuck grotesquely on their heads, the same greenish eyes close together and somehow pinched behind thin noses, the same rectangular faces and lean jaws. 'You only a chit and with four kids aready. That beats all to talk about.' Mag looked around the room, her restless eyes again searching, probing the corners and the cupboard and the piles of unclean odds and ends. 'Only a wee chit,' she repeated, as if these words somehow aided her search for what it was that she would find. And then, as if having explored fully, her eyes came back to Opal's face and thence to Opal's children. 'I've heard havun kids right in a row, one before another one's weaned, I've heard this gives them rickets. It wouldn't surprise me if yourn all has rickets right this day. Now look at the big head on that oldest one. . . . What do you call him?'

'He ain't got no bigger head what he ought to have!' cried Opal, growing more angry and bewildered. 'It's your eyes is crossed or something.'

'My eyes, Mrs. Hunter, is very good eyes, as I have reason to know. I always see what I look at. I see more in a day most people in their whole lifetime. That oldest kid has rickets, I see now. I'll tell you, get some wild carrot blossoms and steep ——'

'Never mind! My kids ain't got rickets and your sayun so don't matter a single ota.'

Opal went to the door to look for Dock, hoping he would soon come, but he was nowhere in sight. When she turned back into the room, Mag was staring hard at Dick who was regarding her with un-amused eyes.

'What do you call that kid, I asked you once.'

'That's something for you to guess at, ain't it?' said Opal spitefully and looked for work to do.

She laid Ruby to sleep in the other room and sent Dick outside to play. The twins were toddling from room to room, and after a little while Bill came over and looked up at Mag, one of his eyes shut and the other round and wide.

'What do you call that one?' asked Mag, looking doubtfully at Bill. 'Is he blind in one eye, or what's the matter with him?'

Opal smiled a little, because Bill was so very funny, she thought, so very cute, staring with one eye at this huge woman and balancing soberly on his fat legs.

'I'll tell you, if he ain't blind in that eye, he will be, squintun it that way. He'll be blind as a bat. I'd tan him good if he was my kid. I'd tan his hind-end every time he squinted.'

Opal suppressed a giggle and looked through a window to see if Dock was coming. Bill toddled away to frolic with his sister, but after a little while he again came back and stared soberly at Mag until she turned in her chair.

'What's the matter with that kid anyhow? I never seen the likes of him. Is that other eye growed shut or what can be the ail of him?'

'I guess he sees all he wants to with one eye,' said Opal, laughing softly. 'I guess he thinks one eye's enough to look at anything as big as you.'

Close by Mag's chair stood her small boys in shy silence, looking in turn at Bill and up at their mother's face. And Bill, after another long scrutiny, went off again, but from time to time across the room he would stare at Mag, always with one eye shut.

'That beats all the band,' declared Mag, curiously watching him. 'I'd larrup a kid of mine what showed such little manners. I'd tan his bottom till he opened that other eye.'

While Opal prepared dinner, Mag talked in a rather loud voice of many things. She was a city person, she told Opal, and this country up here was quite out of harmony with her habits and tastes. She and her husband had gone to town for the winter and they returned here at all only because there

was good sheep pasture to be found. Had Opal ever noticed the unmistakable difference between city folk and country folk? Very likely she had not, because some women were as blind as a new robin. None up here of all these people save herself was city born and bred and she alone was unable to endure this place year in and year out. To live here, as Opal did, in the desolation and snows of long winters would send her mad, and her husband no less. They could not stand it and it was a pity how Opal did. . . . Ruth Whetzel's grave in Annis was now overgrown with weeds, almost lost in a tangle of cactus and thistle, and it seemed too much to break a woman's heart and then abandon her grave to sandstorms. 'I can tell you a lot about your old man, any day you want to hear now. I can tell you how he run off with Ruth Whetzel and broke her heart and that ain't halfun it. I can tell things will make your old ears ache for a month.' A woman, Mag said, ought to know what kind of a man she was marrying. Some women didn't, nor ever showed any interest, and that was another pity among the many pities of life. Had Opal ever noticed that a man's second wife is always much inferior to his first? It was a way men had, to kill a good woman and marry a bad one. For this reason alone she wanted to outlive her husband, for she could well imagine what sort of a wench he would take next time. She would be a tiny chit of a thing. . . . Ruth Whetzel had been a beautiful woman and of good size to have children without giving them rickets and misshapen heads.

'Oh, dry up, will you!' cried Opal, and turned for a moment to give Mag a murderous look. 'I heard a man say you're only a big ox with a face like a donkey.'

Mag straightened a little and seemed to deliberate this statement. 'Face like a donkey! What man ever said such a damable thing? It's your man said that.'

'No, it wasn't my man said that.'

'It was your man all right. It was your man said that. I'll tell you, he ain't no room to talk, with his teeth like a picket fence rabbits could jump through. With his big wall-eyes. He ain't no room to talk with a face like hisen. I'll tell you, my man's got a beard, not just some little patches like yourn. If my man had teeth like yourn he could raise a mustache, that's the truth, to cover them up. A face like a donkey, he said I have, did he! And a body like a beef ox! Well, I wouldn't be no little skinny mite like you, havun kids with rickets ——'

'Oh, dry up! Go on home, will you?'

'A little chit of a thing like you, I say.'

Opal went quickly to the bedroom to see if her child was asleep, and then with the twins in her arms she went outside. Calling Dick, she started over the hill in search of Dock, but after a little way she looked back and saw Mag going homeward, her two boys trailing behind. Trembling with fury, she returned to the house and wept until Dock came. And as before, she went into his arms and told a tale of Mag's abuse, adding to it this time remem-

bered insinuations of his old life. As before, too, Dock stiffened and looked over the hill toward the Avery homestead and he began to curse.

'I got a round bellyful insults from them two people. It's my mind to go over right now and knock his jaw outen place. The worseless scum the earth! And for halfun cent I'd whale her too, without she keeps still. A whole bellyful vile insults is all I've had since they come here. I'm dog-sick and tired of it! God a-mighty! My mind's set right now to go over and if he lets offen a yeep I'll knock him liken hell kicked him feeble. Let me go, Ope, my mind's made up.'

But Opal clung to him, silently measuring his effort to break away, surmising that he meant less than half of what he said. He would never go, she thought, never in a thousand years if she clung to him a little. But if she did not hold him he might go; he would have to go then or yield to shame.

'Let me go, Ope, I say! God a-mighty, woman, let me go right now! I've stood all I figger on from that-air worseless truck existence. My mind's set to go over and wipe him all around his dooryard. Let me loose, will you!'

But Opal clung more firmly, and Dock measured his effort and his wrath against her power to restrain him, cursing more horribly as she tightened her clasp. He accused her now of wanting to protect the miserable skunk, of liking Quirl and his slothful ways; but she knew that he did not mean

these, either, and she smiled a little while burrowing her face in his clothes.

‘Let me go! I aim to hurt that guy awful. Why don’t you let me go? You don’t want him hurt, that’s the God’s truth. You like that-air man or you don’t like me, one or the two. Ope, for God a-mighty’s sake!’

Opal felt him stiffen again, and she knew that he was remembering Mag’s taunts about the forlorn grave and about the woman whose heart he had broken. As an earnest of more oaths to come, he seized her hands round his neck and almost unclasped them, and for a moment she thought he would be free and away.

‘Don’t, dear! It won’t do no good to go over. It won’t do a single good. It’ll just make matters worse ——’

‘God all-Friday, Ope, I’ve stood for too much now! I can break that-air man in two, that’s all of the big he is in my eyes. Ope! will you let me go, or will you let them snoops walk over us till death’s day?’

‘It won’t do no good,’ said Opal, clinging, believing now that he was quite serious. ‘It won’t do no good.’ For a moment she wondered if this was all Dock wanted: for her to plead, for her to dissuade him, for her to feel alarm at the danger threatening Quirl. ‘You could beat him up, but that wouldn’t help. He’d have the law on you. He’s just the kind who’d have the law on you.’

As if her last argument settled the matter, Dock

ceased his swearing and began to pace the room. 'He's that kind all right. He'd have the law on me for a God's truth.' But as if not quite sure that he had acquitted himself nobly, Dock began to threaten again. He would go in spite of the law and right now was as good a time as any other to knock all the devil out of Quirl Avery. He could do it as easy as breath, as easy as rolling off a log. He could do it with one hand behind him and with both eyes blindfolded.

'Of course you can,' said Opal, again coming to him. 'But we ain't no money for fines. And he would have the law on you.'

For a little while Dock was silent. 'Well, I can do it any old day now. I can lick that-air guy on a rat's hide and have enough room to make a bed. I can ——'

'Of course you can, dear, of course you can. No body has said you can't.'

The drouth of this summer was the severest in the history of Antelope. Between May and September there was no rain, and as the hills became more hot and arid the gray sky withdrew to altitudes more passionless and remote. In July the ridges lay naked in shimmering heat and dust, save for the sagebrush and desert weeds, and up the spring wheat crept the yellow and brown of death. Early in the month Dock went out every day to dig into the earth, searching for moisture, learning how far the grain roots had gone down, and he came back more

grimly each time and with less to say. On a trip with him to the valley Opal had seen dust six inches deep in wheel ruts, rolling and flowing like dirty flour over the felly, climbing the spokes in spirals and clouds and flowing away in waves like gray smoke. Along the road were fields of wheat burned yellow, or in wetter places, in vales and on northern slopes, the wheat was stunted and copperish brown with a few pale green leaves above. And in all the fields were innumerable weeds, acres and acres of them so dense that they hid the wheat: wild mustards now putting out their yellow blossoms, red-roots in ugly patches of rugged green, their brushy spikes of flowers and seeds growing high above the wheat; large oval tumbleweeds, armed ragweeds, some prickly lettuce and wild oats, and the Canada thistles, more vigorous and unconquerable than any of these.

They had all been brought here, Dock said, by farmers who hadn't enough sense to fan their seed grain. In a year or two of seasons like this, the country would be overrun by weeds and no power of hell could then raise wheat here. It all came of letting men farm who didn't have enough sense to pound sand in a rat-hole. A dry year now and then seemed to be set apart for weeds, for these pests which God had given to men for no certain reason, and in such a year, as she could see, they thrived abundantly and grew to great size. Mustards he could conquer by mowing and he could chase out the tumbleweeds and wild oats, but the thistle was

a scourge of which any man might think twice and still do nothing. For there was little or nothing to be done. These would grow anywhere, almost out of a stone or in a cellar shut away from sunlight; and once they got possession of a field a man might as well pack up and move. They were so sharp and terrible in their armor of defense that horses could not be driven through them, and unlike other weeds they did not die and roll away, but remained all winter with their thistles turned toward every enemy. Another pest, of which he had seen a few here, was the Russian tumbleweed. It was large and grew spines, and once it got a fair start it would spread over acres in a little while.

All these were a problem to break a man's mind, thank God if they weren't! He did not suppose what he would do. He would not be driven out, not by all the weeds in the kingdom of hell, not if it never rained another drop until the day of doom. Never would he say die as long as he had a breath of life. Men had conquered worse than weeds; they had endured worse than drouth. They were conquering the world day by day, inch by inch, and when this job was done, they would conquer all else in sight: the sun and the moon, if need be, and even the stars, if their minds turned that way. They would conquer the mountains, too, if that was their mind, and it would not surprise him a little bit if some day the mountains were orchards and fields of grain. Some time, by a strange turn of will, they would conquer lightning and thunder, and they

would make rain come when they wanted it, and when they did not want it they would somehow send it away. Had they not conquered all the wild animals of earth and shut them up in pens or hitched them to plows or made them give milk and lay eggs?

All these thoughts Opal should write down in the notebook of which he had spoken long ago. Perhaps other men had thought of these things; perhaps not. Men would invent perpetual motion before they were done with it; they would make water run uphill as fast as it ran down; and they would discover ways whereby to make wheat an ever-bearer, like fruit trees and innumerable other things, and once seed was planted, then the job would be forever done. And these were only a scant few of the things, he could now see, which men would do. They would invent machines that would harvest crops without the need of a man at all, and they would make fruit trees grow as big as pines and strawberry plants as large as sagebrush. These were matters of which he had thought, and a little thinking here and now showed him the clear sense of them. Great odds and ends of unsupposed things were going to be achieved soon. And another matter: men would discover a gas or a smoke or something which they would scatter over a field of weeds, whereupon the weeds would disappear like birds into a cloud. . . .

‘For the love of life!’ cried Opal. ‘You’ll make my head ache. Talk and talk is all I ever hear. Just dreams and dreams that won’t never come true. Not a bushel of wheat in sight and you set there and

say what men will do. You just set and talk like the biggest fool a person ever heard.'

'That's all right ——'

'Don't you know dreams never come true? Don't you know that, for God sake, and you a man thirty-seven year old? I'd think life would learn you a little something now and then.'

'Sure dreams come true. God a-mighty, Ope, dreams come true without you don't just set and grumble all your days. They don't if you just set around —— Who's that, caterun off across that field? That looken like Hansie Hansen to me.'

'Dreams don't come true in a million year, I say. Not silly dreams like yourn. This country won't never be more than sagebrush and weeds and thistles ——'

'Now, who do you reckon that is, catter-cornerun off over there? That must be Hansie, but God never see him in that big of a hurry afore this. Looken that belly-achun fool steppun it off.'

'—— thistles and dust and hawks and squirrels and a stinkun cistern with mice in it ——'

'That's Hansie all right. But God never see him in that big of a hurry afore now. Where's he off to, do you know?'

'—— mice, I said, and stinkbugs and lonesome winters and wheat that burns up like paper ——'

'His stomach must be better, do you reckon? Looken the way he goes, Ope. And where do you think Ella is? Off with Con Wote, do you know?'

'Oh, shut up for the love of life! I tell you your

dreams is all silly nonsense. You've talked for years what you would do, and what have you done that a person can see? Just mention it.'

'That man could do a pile a work, Ope. He's as big as all outdoors and his stomach ain't half the fix mine's in. He could work liken old sixty ——'

'What have you done, I said. Just mention it.'

'Oh, for God a-mighty's sake! Ain't I worked my hide right offen my bones? Ain't I plowed more ground any man up here? Ain't I raised the biggest crop? Tell me now what you expect!'

'And what good has it done to work like a nigger? We're still in debt, ain't we? More in debt than when we come here. What's the use to stay here and get in debt more?'

'Well, grumble your insides out. Keep your naggun up, for God sake, keep it up. I told you afore now you ain't no fit woman for a farmer. I told you, didn't I? You're gettun to be a splutter-heels, that's all.'

'Oh, la-la! Well, mebbe your first wife would a-been sweet as pie in this forsaken hole. Mebbe she would a-lived in a foul shack ——'

'Now, Ope! . . . Looken that Hansie. He's puked hissself into some crazy notion, I can see. Walkun fit to bust in two. . . . He's catterun off to Hype's, I can see now.'

When Opal walked upon the hills a great swarm of grasshoppers went before her. Under her feet were hordes of locusts and of crickets, large and

small and of many colors, jumping wildly and landing upside down in sagebrush, crawling along limbs and grasses and over the dry earth, their hind legs thrusting large elbows above their backs; above the wingless crickets, hopping farther or flying was a swarm of smaller locusts, and above all these was a sheet of large locusts, redwings and graywings and blackwings, some zigzagging in the air and crackling, others flying swiftly away and dropping suddenly, and still others circling and zipping and descending like a dark cloud of tiny chips. On the dry hills they rose in clouds that darkened the sun; in the vales where trees and tall bushes grew they flowed in swarms of cracklings and hissings through the sear vegetation and clung in thousands on trunks and limbs. Patches of grass and weeds they had swept as if with fire. Opal stepped upon them against her will when she walked, and they flew and hopped upon her clothes, crawling into her hair and over her flesh. Her chickens gorged on these until their craws bulged, and once when she caught one and felt its crawl it was like feeling a big handful of grasshoppers in a thin feathered sack. Here and there were large hideous black-bodied crickets that made her flesh creep and stuck to the under side of limbs were other crickets that sang an ugly song like the sound of small claws on tin. Everywhere, too, were innumerable gray squirrels that would sit up when she approached and dive into holes when she drew near. Their shrill twittering cry greeted her at every turn: from bushes and under gnarled

aspen roots, from the stable where they gathered in flocks to eat oats with the horses, even from under the corners of her house. They tumbled into the cistern and she drew them out in a pail and watched them crawl away, drenched and nearly dead; and they fell into the dark hole of the well.

By this hole she often sat and peered down to see what was there. Dimly in the murk she could see, now and then, something alive and moving, a small thing striving to climb the hard walls, climbing a little and falling back and again climbing. Three years ago, she reflected, the sight of this would have stirred in her a pain, but she had changed a lot in three years and was not now the woman she had been then. She had seen death, little but death, it seemed, since coming here, and a squirrel dying slowly in a black hole could no longer move her to deep pity. Out by the grain where Dock had scattered poisoned oats, she had seen hundreds of them lying bloated on their backs, their eyes glassy in death. She had seen countless things die, since coming here, die often in cruel and horrible ways, and there was little use to waste pity on a trapped squirrel. God seemed to have made these small trim things for death alone. Hawks swooped down and carried them off in their claws; coyotes came over the hills and slew them; weasels ran down into their holes and sucked their blood. The ways of coyotes and weasels she had not seen, but Dock told her of these. The way of hawks she saw almost daily, for the sky was full of them in this barren

year; and even when she did not watch them she could hear their wild hungry call, far up. Every noon she looked out to see them, small swift ones and great soaring ones, circling round and round, turning their heads from side to side and now dropping on huge wings and soon rising with a swishing sound, a squirrel or a mouse clutched in their talons. These hawks were his friends, Dock said, but for Opal they were scavengers of death.

Hype was building some sort of house over the hill, and on days when the wind came toward her Opal could hear his hammer faintly or she could hear the dull thud of his axe. With the sky above him full of hawks, with the earth around him swarming with locusts and crickets, he would be singing his crazy songs. It was hard to understand such a man as this, a man who would sing in the face of drouth and starvation and death. And in many ways, as Opal could see more and more clearly, Dock was like him, like all the Hunters whom she had seen. They were a hardy lot, too stubborn to recognize defeat, too eager with their dreams to see much at all save hope. On the Swan Valley benchland, another desert of dry farms sick with heat, there were Ike and Jack Hunter, and down by the river, across from the Wheaton place, there was Joe Hunter, the first pioneer of them all. Dock said he was the youngest, but he would be the best farmer of the lot. It was one of his cherished dreams to copy no other, a brother least of all. If Joe bought a Champion binder, Dock would get another kind, and when

he learned that Ike was working mules, Dock declared that mules were of no account. 'He'll go hellety belt with them mules some day. He'll get all his insides drug outen his body.'

As autumn approached, winds came over the hills and swept great clouds of dust across the sky. Dust-storms would move languidly like mountains of smoke, and often in late afternoon Opal could not see beyond the radius of a mile. Dust-clouds came over and through her house, covering everything with a coating of gray, or they were blown far up like a thin sheet of fog and turned golden by the sun. Vegetation everywhere, even the greenest leaves of aspens, was turned whitish with earth, and when she kicked a sagebrush or shook a tree there would fall a shower of dust. The copperish redroots were now gray and the leaves of chokeberries and wild geraniums which hitherto in late August had always been blood-red under the frost. Dust was blown into the cistern until its water wore a gray scum, and dust had bleached the sandy-haired pigs and the scarlet wattles of her roosters. And always now, as autumn came steadily on, she could hear day-long and night-long the murmuring and crackling of winds over the sear grass and weeds, hissing through bushes and trees and strumming over seed pods.

Hype would come to borrow nails or a saw or a little food, and while Opal searched for these things he would sing his silly songs.

'O, I am an old man now,
And I was a young man then,
And this is the kind of thing, heard tell,
That comes to the best of men!'

Or:

'O, I might starve to death,
And my woman she might grow thin,
But this ain't half as bad, heard tell,
As many a life has been!'

And after he was gone his words and his melody would haunt Opal's mind, bringing to her a new cheerfulness, a little hope for another year. Or his chatter would awaken fresh wonders in a lonely day.

'Ope, don't you know what's good for a bald head yet? Don't you never think about that subject, like I told you to? . . . You know, I'm tryun some other things on that old stoten bottle of a horse. He near died with that mixer coal oil and balsam sap. I'm tryun some boiled sagebrus'n and angle-worm oil on him now. I got a new cure for stomach trouble, tell Dock. Flowers of larkspur cooked in a juice. Lem Higley's took it and he ain't dead yet.' Or again: 'My dog's got his face full a porkypine quills. He's a queer sight and he just sets and lets out awful yelps each time his tail wags.'

Hype himself, Opal reflected, was a queer lot. At his absurdities she would laugh a little and she would talk gayly with him, but only when Dock was out of sight. For Dock would come in, weary and dusty from summer fallowing, and he would look at her with undisguised suspicion.

'I see Hype over again.' Resenting his tone, Opal would give no answer and after a futile while Dock would repeat: 'I see Hype come over the hill.'

'Well, that's too bad. I guess you'd be jealous your own father if he was to come.'

'My old man's dead,' said Dock, speaking in an aggrieved voice. 'You knowed that.'

'You'd be jealous his ghost, then. You'd be jealous his ghost if it was to come.'

On the afternoon following Hype's story of the dog, Opal went over the hill. The unhappy beast wagged its tail at her, and then, as if from sudden pain, it yelped horribly and slunk away. She peered at it under the wagon and saw a tangle of white quills sticking out of its mouth and nose. Mary was away, somewhere over by the river, and Hype said he was too busy to bother with a dog now. If the beast hadn't sense enough to leave porcupines alone, why, it would have to be content with its beard of thistles. Some dogs were fools and some were not. When herding sheep he had had a dog, a wise and cunning beast, that would maneuver a porcupine upon its back and rip its belly open without getting a single quill in its face. These quills would all work out in time. Like the fuzz of foxtail, they would never be still. They would work out of his nose and his jaws, and perhaps next time the dog would show an ounce of sense. They would all work out and the crazy beast would be none the worse off. Whereupon Hype began to improvise a silly song

about a dog that got its mouth full of needles and Opal turned homeward.

Tethered to a sagebrush was Hype's gaunt old stoten bottle of a horse and Opal stopped to look at it. On one thigh was a whitish patch of hide from which Hype had long ago pulled the hair and to which he had applied innumerable plasters and oils and juices in a vain attempt to make hair grow again. There was something on the patch now, an oily lather that smelled faintly of onions. Crawling over it were some flies. He would make hair grow again, Hype had said; he would find a way to make hair grow on anything with the breath of life, and then he would be rich. All the advertised preparations were no good; he had wasted enough money on them to buy a farm.

Before her, as she led Dick and pushed a cart, the crickets and locusts went in clouds. On a hill she could see dust flowing around Dock where he worked. Brittle bushes and crisp grasses and weeds rustled and hissed under a low breeze and in a near cove a wind sounded like the faint rushing wash of water. Moles had thrown up fine soft mounds of earth, the tiny hills and knolls of them dotting the country everywhere, and into these Opal sank ankle-deep and felt the warm soil filling her shoes.

On the hill above her house and yard she sat for a long while and stared at the familiar things of her life: at the house with its sagging earth roof out of which a few weeds were growing; at the cistern with the hog wallow, now dry and hard, deep in one side;

at the straw barn and the broken fence of the corral. Under a wind-stripped bush she saw a hen, sick with what Dock called the blind staggers, rising to balance a moment on her legs, falling back on her rump and cackling a little. Lean thin-haired pigs were rooting into the manure pile for oats and a gaunt sow was walking with a litter of squealing young ones at her side. Tied to a post a calf was fighting horseflies, throwing its head from shoulder to shoulder and switching with its tail. Through the dark door of the barn she could see two old harnesses hanging from spikes, and outside, on the knot of a dwarfed aspen, was Dock's saddle, now bleached and shrunk by sun and rain.

She shuddered with hopeless misery for so much that was now desolate and ugly and growing into her life. In the house were unclean dishes and a sack full of dirty clothes. Dock's stinking things were hanging behind a door, and there were piles of old things in corners and under the bed. Mouse traps were set in a dozen places, and there were odds and ends of things that stunk of mice and rats. Three years ago Lem Higley had called her a lovely woman — or was it four years or five? — but no one could call her beautiful now. These pitiless hills, this lonely sky and this great solitude, were fashioning her into one of their kind, alike with the weeds and the dust and the gray nights full of hunting winds. On a nail by the door hung Dock's greasy suspenders and behind the stove stood his old shoes, stiff and ripped and half full of earth. The

cracks between the floor boards were choked with match stubs and toothpicks and scraps of food, and behind a mop-board was a nest of red ants over which Dock had poured coal oil. In the crack under the window seat were weed seeds and the scales of caterpillars and dead butterflies. Each part of the house, inside and out, she could see vividly, having lived for years now with each ugly thing sticking out of her mind.

A new and lovely house Dock had promised, but there would never be one, not while she wanted it and could cherish it. There would be a lovely new house to die in, perhaps, to be an old hag in and to await death. Over the hill beyond, Grandma Avery would be sitting by the door now, reaching with skinny hands into a ragbag, looking with waterish eyes far away to the time when she was young; and somewhere Grandpa Avery would be wandering over the hills, listening to the wind. There would be a new house to be an old hag in. Around the stove-pipe, where it pierced the roof, the earth sifted and fell upon the stove and a narrow circle of daylight was visible beyond. One of Dock's old jumpers was stuffed in a broken pane. . . . Grandma's hands were like claws, like the claws of hawks, and under her chin hung a large pouch of loose hide. Grandpa had thin legs and huge feet and his scant hair fell in white locks to his shoulders. He had a voice like the sound of wind through the gables. . . . Under the bed was another pair of Dock's old shoes, stinking with sweat and unclean earth; over the foot of the

bed lay his heavy underclothes, spotted with stains of machine oil that had soaked through his overalls. Not in two years had he taken a bath. She could remember only one in the three years he had been here. Or four years or five. . . .

'Looken my skin, woman. It's white as a borned babe's. What's the sense a bath long as I'm bright and clean as a dollar?' His heavy cotton underwear kept him clean, he said, except his ankles and feet and these he scrubbed now and then.

'I don't think my old man took a bath in all his days and he was clean a man as you ever see. His skin was white and clean as you ever see.'

Most men up here, he said, never bathed in all their living life. Lem Higley had not had a bath since his mother last ducked him in a tub, and Con Wote boasted that the less frequently he bathed the better the women seemed to like him. Hype bathed a lot, but he was a silly ninkumpoop anyway, when all was done and said. . . .

On the walls were yellow stains, spearlike and fan-shaped, and from a crack in the roof there would be a lance of sunlight lying on the floor, creeping slowly eastward as the day passed, fading into darkness if a cloud covered the sun. Athwart it the wings of a fly would flash for a moment or a stinkbug would be a black glitter as he crawled over it. Somewhere far under the bed, among long unstirred webs and dust, was a small cardboard box in which were to be found strange odds and ends: elk teeth and the claws of a bear, old daguerreotypes of Dock's relatives, a

photograph of his first wife broken across the face. She had dark sad eyes and a lovely mouth. First wives were better than second ones, Mag had said. . . . Mag had heavy jaws that pulled the skin of her face taut when she raised her head, and Quirl had triangular ears, large and funnel-shaped. On Grandma's finger was a thin sharp wedding ring, tied with a piece of dirty cord to her wrist, and over her knob of dead hair she wore the foot of an old stocking. She would say, 'I ween it's aright,' in a faint old voice.

She would be like Grandma some day, in thirty years or in forty, it little mattered how many. Her children would be gone then, scattered to the world, themselves raising families and growing old. Somewhere, too, she would sit in the loneliness of age, watching young and lovely things, staring with old eyes filling with blindness, waiting and waiting for the last thing of all. Little it would matter then that men had called her lovely, that she had danced and sung and loved for a golden while. Already her skin and her eyes were fading, at twenty-five, even now. Twenty-six and twenty-seven and twenty-eight — these would come soon, and then her thirties and forties swiftly, and after that she would not care. She would be fat or thin, no matter which, and ugly to look at and to live with. Next year and the next with no difference, drouth and locusts and weeds, horseflies and hawks. Fields of grain in June, green and lovely; yellow in July and burned and shrunken in August. Another child and an-

other, six and eight and ten, barefooted and in patched rags, growing up to ride plows and follow harrows in the dust, to marry farmers' sons and farmers' daughters and to go elsewhere to breed and starve. Cycles of endless struggle with stubborn earth, ugly years under the same passionless sky, the same ground moiled into dust and turned over and under and over and under.

Always the same gray hills to look at, morning and night; the same ugly yard with its hog wallows and sick hens; the same house growing old and full of dirt and of the stink of mice and rats. Always the same, changeless. To rise each morning to cook breakfast of little or nothing, to drudge in a hot or a cold kitchen all day long, and again to cook and to crawl weary and heartsick into an unclean bed. Chill mornings, white with frost, days of dust and endless winds, evenings huddled around a fire as darkness closed in. . . . To listen to a man's dreams, to a man's talk of what would never be done in all the years of earth. In God's name, all these and little else! Day in and day out, one like another, hopeless and unending. A new calendar, another year, a new figure on the right of the old three, meaningless save as a sign of age. In God's name! . . . in God's name! . . .

IX

THIS year, in which nothing that man sowed on Antelope was ripened and nothing reaped, Dock always called 'that droughty time,' when looking back upon it, but for Opal it passed into memory as the season of dust with a pale sun sifting through in lurid yellow. It was a gray section of a gray past, steadily more distant and lost, but always vivid and torn by shrill cries when her mind turned back. A loneliness cooped large under a pale sky, full of dead things and things dying: of wheat a scant twelve inches high, of squirrels poisoned everywhere, of sick hens gurgling water from a rusty pan. Flowerless in the fall save for a few bushy goldenrods, a few weedy asters low on the ground, a few harebells whitish and dwarfed.

And the years that came after, one and another, slowly, dragging through cold lonely winters and hot dry summers, were of like kind, carrying a little more rain or fewer winds and storms of dust, adding larger blossoms to serviceberry bushes and letting wheat reach a little nearer the sky. One year and another and another, all of like kind, adding to growing debts and to the number and variety of weeds. Indistinguishable years, two and three and four, each crowded full of ugly things, each bringing another babe to wear the rags of the last, some bitterness or some tragedy rounding full in each.

Two of Mary's sons sleeping on the hill, then three, then four. Henry brought from the mountains, George from Wyoming, to make six at last, six small mounds in a row, shrinking under the cold and the heat, leveled by wind and storm. A tiny shanty added to Mary's house for a kitchen, a new roof of aspen and earth on Opal's own. Mary setting traps around the graves for badgers and coyotes, Hype forever singing his tunes while riding a plow or tinkering with an old drill. People moving valleyward in the fall of the year, one and another, going elsewhere to build new homes, leaving plowed hills here to grow up with weeds. Other people coming to burn the weeds away in yellow waves of flowing flame and to plow the hills again and to plant new seed where other men had failed. And some of these going, too, after a year or two years, packing their few things into a wagon and crunching far down over the hills, leaving an old house with blind windows and a straw barn banked around with old manure. Cycles of effort while men cursed and starved and then the forlorn silence of vanishing things. A new neighbor in one year, gone in the next, and a desolate place awaiting the third. Endless talk of men who stayed and fought weeds and drouth, talk of new ways to conquer pests or to keep the earth moist in a rainless year.

'I aim to get a mower and cut them-there weeds and burn them.'

'Plow deeper, I say. Plow down a foot and ground will stay wet.'

'Harrow the ground a lot, that's it. Dust won't dry out liken clods.'

A schoolhouse down on Antelope Creek, one room of rough logs, and school for three or four months of a year. A deep-hipped, heavy-armed girl from somewhere to teach. Grain-buyers coming up from the valley, paunched fellows in spotless linen, driving big cars and exploring the prospects of good crops. A Fourth of July celebration, dusty and wind-swept; men in rubber collars and overalls, and women, skinny or full-breasted, in gingham dresses; a tattered flag flying from a tall willow guyed with a barbed wire. Talk of establishing a church and finding a man qualified to be a bishop.

'Ed Wynn make a good bishop. He's full a plaver.'

'I'd as live see Job Bottom bishop as any man I can think of right off. Job Bottom is a religious man for a fact.'

'Tim Avery I'd like to see. Tim knows the way to heaven if any man hereabouts does. It's Tim make a good bishop.'

A binder worn out before it was paid for and a new one bought on credit. The deed to a homestead and taxes to pay and heavy assessments for the training of other people's children. . . . These were memories of years, of one like another, each adding its weeds and its debts, its dreams and hopes of April time running into a tangle of death and hopelessness in chill autumns. A lovely green spring putting out violets and a late summer reaping its harvest of locusts and weeds. Acres of rich wet soil

slowly dying into fields of burning grain and the purple flowers of millions of thistles, the harsh seed pods of mustards, the prickles and hooks of bedstraw, the brittle tumbling amaranths snapping off in winds and rolling in thousands over the hills.

These were things and memories of things to choke the mind and shut all dreams away in darkness. Fields of wheat spreading large stools ere the weeds were up and lifting vigorous green stems, only to be overtaken and out-topped by these other things from God's hand, only to be dwarfed and hidden from sight. Fields glutted with thistles and cockleburs and ragweeds. One year or two years or three years, no matter. . . . People coming from nowhere and going back into nowhere, leaving their trails of defeat behind them, leaving paths among sagebrush and torchweeds to their house door and to their straw barn, leaving old chips where woodpiles had been and a house with blind windows and a dooryard overrun by weeds. Leaving a cistern tumbling in to be the home of mice and squirrels, leaving a broken-down drill or a wagon bed fallen to pieces, these signs of an abandoned farm. Other people coming to clean out the cistern and white-wash it anew with cement, to scrub out the shack and repair a rotting stable, people full of hope, people who went singing to their work. Some of these to go the way they had come, others to remain and yield day by day to the timeless loneliness of these hills that somehow, in a slow, passionless way, choked the song of men's hearts and filled their

mouths with curses. These were memories, these were years, alike and changeless, to shudder at and never to forget. . . .

One year like another, over and over in sameness each ending in dead hope and death. In the long autumns of frost and of withered things, when the sky was drawing away to its cold altitudes, one could look back with wonder upon the spring and summer road along which he had come. One's mind could reach back to the beginning of the last year, exploring its promise, like the promises of years before, searching among its heavy snows and its glorious awakening of spring, hanging all the trees with lovely green and setting flowers over the earth. One could remember how hope for a better year grew large in one's heart and the eager talk of men everywhere on these hills, planting their acres again with renewed faith. One could remember young fields of wheat, as lovely as any to be found, and he could hear again the talk of men who were spending money in their dreams. All this as the old year went out and the new came in. One would buy a binder and build a frame house, another would pay his debts and get a new team and a cow or two, and still a third would lift a mortgage on a tiny farm in the valley. But after the thin harvest was gathered, the threshing paid for and the seed grain, little or nothing was left to buy things with, and not uncommonly the end of the year added new debts to old ones.

How men could go on forever in this way, begetting debts and counting their losses, was not easy to understand. There must come an end some time, a day on which they would abandon hope and yield to the weeds and drouth. And if they kept on, talking and dreaming, planting in year after year and harvesting little more than their seed, they would be old on the day of reckoning and there could be no new beginning then. The mind ached with trying to understand the ways of such men. Their courage to drudge seemed endless and their power to hope seemed past all reason. Upon them, in the fall of the year, and upon Dock most of all, there fell a silence, and into their eyes there came the fear of men haunted by a ruthless power, unseen and beyond control. But with the awakening of another spring they gathered hope again and marched with greater courage into the long hard work of another year. Somewhere ahead of them was success, they seemed never to doubt, and they would find it and clutch it with their gnarled hands. One year of wasted effort and two and three, another and still another, and yet they fought on, a strange silence coming more and more around them, the severity of fruitless toil breaking their strength and hurrying them prematurely into old age.

And it was at this that Opal wondered most, at the fierce silent drama between these men and these hills. Each year made more acute her awareness of it as she saw new homesteads taken, farther and more difficult ridges scarred by plows, even trees

and brush grubbed out and land broken high against the southern mountain's rim. It was on the aspen-covered slope of this mountain that she saw most clearly what was being done here. She could see a plow and its horses, all like a tiny speck, moving round and round a hill, and at the end of a day she could see the dark circle of a dozen furrows. And when, after weeks, the hill was plowed, it was only a very small patch on the mountain's breast, like other small patches clinging high up or low down, near the creek. Or she could see a cloud of dust, large, she knew, to the man lost within, but very small to her who looked from far away.

Everywhere between the wide lonely sky and the rolling reach of this desert country were men, invisibly grim at their work, tiny things lost here and there among their efforts, scarring the gray breast of the earth and sending up clouds of dust. And this drama, when thus seen from afar, seemed to her no less absurd than hopeless, seemed like the drama of ants trying to build their kingdom in a plowed field. For she had seen ants working eagerly, week after week, carrying tiny sticks and leaves and bits of earth and building for themselves a home, and she had seen Dock come with a plow and bury their kingdom or scatter it in ruins. And she had seen the frantic survivors, building again for weeks or months with their tiny and invincible courage, and she had seen Dock come with a harrow and scatter them again; and again she had seen them build. And somehow, vaguely but certainly, the way of men

here was the same, a mightier and more terrible power over them, but under their feet the same treacherous shifting of death. The way was the same. In both there was the awful shuddering uncertainty and there was the slow pitiless creep of ruin.

Dock laughed at her, said her mind was sick with madness; but in his eyes now and then she saw something akin to terror and in his voice when he cursed, she heard a strange vibrancy hunting his oaths. He would repeat, in one year and another: 'You're no fit missus for a farmer. You just become a splutter-heels.' And Opal would answer: 'But we're still in debt. You don't say to that. You don't say. You just want to stay here till we starve to death, that's all the little you want.'

But they were not starving, Dock would exclaim; not enough for a man to say about. Weren't they all as fat and healthy as people anywhere? The young ones and all? There was Dick, a little pale because of his melancholy, but there was Bill, as husky a lad as could be found in a year's search. And Em and Frost: they were upstanding girls, with the strength of young bulls. And Garnet, too. Would she look at Jack, not yet three years old and as big as a kid of six ought to be! And was not Amethyst the fattest babe in the entire Antelope country? Compare their children, if she would, with Quirl's puny boys, their ears stuck like bridle blinds to their skulls, or with Hansie's that were already doubling up with belly-aches. Then perhaps she

would shut her mouth for a long while. Or with any other kids, no matter where: with Hype's skinny shitepokes or with Ed Wynn's, all legs and arms and appetites. . . . And it was baby's prattle to talk of leaving this place now, after all these years of hard slavery, at the very moment when he was coming into his own. He would soon raise a crop to make her eyes stand out of her head.

'Oh, for the love of life! That's all I've heard, ever since I come here. There'll always be something to make my eyes pop out!'

Well, he had been learning the ways of this country, figuring out its cycles of dryness and wetness, and what he already knew would fill a book. There was order in all things, he had decided, in this country no less than in another. There was a wet year and then many dry ones, perhaps three or seven, and next year would be wet. In a wet year he would plant two bushels on the acre and harvest sixty; in a dry year he would plant only two pecks and it would not burn up. But about the weather he would soon care little enough, for rain or no rain he had learned how to make wheat grow in a dry year.

'Dry up, will you! You make my head ache. Dreams and dreams is all you know. One and then another and then another.'

He had found a way by which to conquer drouth, believe it or not. He would plant winter wheat early in August, and in springtime, when the ground began to dry, he would harrow the wheat again and again until it was covered by a coating of fine dust. Dust

would hold the moisture and keep the sun out, as he had learned much later than need have been. And the weeds he would kill by summer fallowing at the right time: not in June, as most men did, but in late July just before the plants ripened. If a few weeds were left uncovered and grew again, he would tear them out with a harrow or go over the field with a hoe. To burn weeds after they had ripened was a poor way, almost no way at all, but such was the way of the farmers here. These were things he had figured out, thinking now and then, perhaps in long nights when Opal was asleep or perhaps when working like a dog out in the fields. No matter — he had figured them out and there would be things for her to see. In one year and another she had spluttered, no such woman as a farmer had need of, and all the while he had been laying plans and carrying on. He had been weary, God knew, too weary at times to lift a hand, too tired to remember even his own name. But he had complained little, said little or nothing at all, because these were not the ways of a man who had set his mind on a thing. He had come here to win and win he would, or he would die and that would be the end.

‘And leave me and all these kids to starve, I guess. I guess that’s what you mean.’

Not while he had life would he give up, yield to these hills, for men worth their salt fought through to the round finish. His old man had fought in this wise and fighting against great odds seemed to be a Hunter’s way. Sometimes he fancied there was

more meaning in his name than he had ever looked for. There *was* meaning in names, and this was another idea that had come to him; for what could one find in such a name as Avery or Hansen? But look at the name of Wynn. . . . In the valley he had known a man with the name of Dodgett, and that was a name that fit like a glove on a hand.

'I guess you think you're a hunter, is that it? What do you think you're hunting for?'

'I aim to stay right here till I win,' he said, looking at her with sober, mirthless eyes. 'I aim to win.'

'But your name ain't Wynn, it's Hunter, and what do you think you're hunting for? You're just locoed with dreams, that's all I think. I won't think another thing long as I stay here.'

'I'm set on my feet right now, Ope. I ain't worked all these years to no account. I've figgered things out liken a needle point, fine as a needle point. Rain or no rain, I know how to raise wheat now. Next year you'll see ——'

'Oh, in God's name!'

X

THE violets were again out, and Opal's weariness softened a little in the warmth of spring, an old and strange feeling of youth, of something waking from its slow dying, stirring in her breast. On windless days Dock's song was loud in the fields where he was planting spring wheat, or in the house he talked hopefully and played with his children, his words and his ways finding glad recognition in Opal's mind. All the worthless people, he said, all save Quirl Avery, had left this country, and those who remained would be doing tremendous things soon. Lem Higley was to marry ere long, in June, perhaps, a woman whom he had found somewhere, a big lanky creature almost twice his size. But she was a worker from away back and Lem would be a new man now. He would have to work, to go like a bat out of hell, or his gaunt bride would double him over her knee and blister his bottom. She was that kind, a man could see. She would stand no nonsense, not a little bit, and Lem would find his mouth full of coals if he didn't stop his endless chatter and get to work. If some power would only break the two-pound nose on Con Wote's face, leading him as it did in search of all women but his own, and give Hansie Hansen the flogging of his life, these also might become men worth a second thought.

'Did you ever stop to think, Ope, men with big

noses is the ones chase women? That's a God's fact.'

'Well, your nose ain't no small thing to look at.'

Ella Hansen was running with other men now; with one of the Jullups she had been seen twice and with Bunker Idams she had celebrated the last Fourth. Bunker's nose was larger than Con Wote's. She needed a man who would larrup the daylights out of her and put her to bed for a week. Hansie would be waking up one of these days, waking like a mad bull, if signs were worth anything, and then there would be the devil to pay.

'If I had that-air woman, if she was my missus, Ope, I'd whale her in a inch her life. I'd damn near kill her, that's a fact. And I'd put the shiverun ager in Con Wote till he'd tremmle liken a new borned calf.'

'Oh, you're always about to hurt some one! You'll be hurtun some one if you ain't careful.'

'Just let Con Wote come makun love to you and I'll send him hellety belt to rock and ruin. His old nose ——'

'Don't worry yourself. I'll hurt him plenty well enough.'

Of the children, Dock's favorite clearly was Bill, a fierce youngster who grinned darkly and who still shut one eye when he looked at a person. Dick, the oldest, was a sensitive lad of few words and fewer smiles, who was so melancholy, Dock declared, that he would never be worth a tinker's whoop. He

would pine his life away, for no good reason, and slowly die of grief like the mourning dove.

'Without I knowed better I'd think that-air kid wasn't mine a-tall. I'd think ——'

'What do you mean!' cried Opal, glaring at him.

'For God a-mighty's sake, woman, keep your shirt on! I said if I never knowed better, didn't I?'

'You'd better not think you know anything else. You'd better be careful what you think.'

Bill, Dock said, would be a farmer after his own heart: hard-working, quick for a fight if there was need of one, strong as a mad bull and smart as a whip. This all came of being born in the right month, though, as he now remembered, he had missed October by only one day. It was strange, the difference one day could make. These narrow margins were common to great things of the world. He had almost missed thinking of a way whereby to conquer weeds, the thought having come at a moment when his mind could see no way out; and he had narrowly achieved another triumph of reason, that wherewith he would offstand the drouth. Life was a hit-and-miss matter, clearly, the untiring minds hitting and the lazy ones missing. Bill would be quick for his chance, like a cyclone where other men would be little spurts of wind; Dick would slowly peter away in his solitude and never work up enough sweat to keep himself clean. With Dock it was Bill this and Bill that; it was 'Bill, hunt your Ma some wood afore I skin you alive'; or it was 'Bill, how long afore you can ride the plow?' or it was 'Bill, how

much wheat do you kallate that north forty will thrash?' And seeing, with not a little pain, that Dock's heart was set on Bill, Opal turned with sympathy to Dick, striving to be impartial with both. Dick, she understood more clearly, his long silences and his recoiling from harsh words, and she set herself between him and his father's taunts and wrath. Bill was utterly different, not the kind of child she had imagined would ever be born to her, and his little fiendish ways were beyond her patience and often her love.

Though only six now, he would wander over the hills for hours at a time, often missing his supper and appearing after dark, searching for devilish things that a boy could do. With looped strings over the holes of squirrels he would catch these and make them swim round and round in a large wooden tub by the cistern, or he would push their heads under, or he would hold them up by their tails, their heads under, and let them slowly sink while they gurgled and clawed. Locusts and butterflies he caught and threw upon the hills of large red ants, and for long whiles he would watch the ants swarm over them and draw them down their holes. Of these things and others Emerald told her mother. Bill would catch horseflies, the large black swift ones, and thrust a slender straw or grass blade into their hinder part, whereupon he would set them free and watch them climb into the sky, dragging the stem behind them. This was his father's way of treating horseflies and it was Lem Higley's. 'They

won't never come back, them flies won't,' he had heard Dock say. 'They'll fly clean to heaven with that straw outen their hind-end.'

And when Opal protested Bill's little cruelties, Dock would defend him, even seem to be proud of the lad's ways. These were his enemies, he said: horseflies and locusts and squirrels. If they didn't relish the kind of treatment Bill gave them, they could go elsewhere; they could lean out to another part of the world and never come back. Opal was silly, as silly as a woman could be who had any sense at all. When with poison he gave a bellyache to squirrels she wanted to nurse them back to health so that they could again mow his wheat down; she didn't want the ants to have any grasshoppers: she wanted them all for her chickens to gulp and get sick on; and she wanted horseflies and deerflies and gnats and mosquitoes to suck the last ounce of blood from his beasts. And when he got a boy, an up-and-coming young one, who went out and murdered these pests, she said he was cruel and wanted to lar-rup his skin off. It was little enough that a man could conquer, that a man could do, with a woman like her for a wife. He might as well lie down in a hole somewhere and pull some dirt over him and go to sleep. He might as well do anything, go to any God-forgotten spot, as to try his hand at honest work with a splutter-heels always drumming in his ears. What she wanted, for a fact, was a house full of kids like Dick, afraid to wipe their noses, too like their mother ever to be able to cut a calf or saw the

horns off a steer. They would be a dead expense and it was such as these that drifted to cities and became white-collared men. . . .

‘Rave on, you big fool! Make my head ache, will you! There’s decent ways to kill things and undecent ways and Bill is just cruel, that’s all. He’s just like his dad.’

‘And Dick’s just liken his mother, God a-mighty!’

‘There ain’t no sense to torture things. If he wants to kill squirrels and things in a decent way, why, all right, but there ain’t no sense to torture things.’

‘Looken here, woman! That’s all them-there horseflies do, just torture my horses in plumb fits. Day in and day out that’s all them sons a bitches do. And I’ll poke a stick in the hind-end every last one I get my hands on and send it clean to heaven. Afore God, that’s my mind, and without you show some sense ——’

‘Well, do it then and don’t stand there and glare at me! Learn your kids to be just like you, that’s all you want. Learn them to torture little things can’t defend themselves and run away from big things like Quirl Avery. Learn them all that and they’ll be the dead likes of their dad.’

For several moments Dock did not move or speak and Opal was a little afraid of what he might say or of what he might do. He was staring at her now, his eyes so wide open that she could see the white of them entirely around the iris, and his lower lip was drawing down in a way peculiar to him when his

wrath was mounting. His upper teeth slowly became visible, yellowish and sharp and with spaces between, and around his thick lower lip, now hanging down, was a line of tobacco juice. All this Opal saw as she held his gaze and she saw his pale eyes harden until they were like cold and bluish steel.

‘So that’s what’s been in your craw,’ he said, and the quaver in his voice, the flicker in his eyes, made her shrink. ‘You think I’m afeard that worseless low-down bastard. You think I’m afeard ——’

‘I never said I thought you was afraid of anything.’ Opal’s voice trembled a little and she felt a tightness in her chest, up her throat. ‘I never said ——’

‘That’s for why you been actun funny a long time back. You think I’m afeard that-air truck existence, do you! You think I run and I’ll learn my kids to run. . . . That’s what’s been stuck in your craw for too long to say about. That’s for why you ain’t been a woman a man could live with, said you was sick or you didn’t want no more kids ——’

‘No, that ain’t why.’

‘That’s why. Afore heaven I see it all liken a chunk daylight. I’m afeard that-air man and that’s your thought. I’m nigh scart outen my wits, that’s your thought. Well, just watch how right you was all the time.’

And with a gesture of contempt for Opal and her blindness, Dock strode from the house and disappeared over the hill toward the Avery place.

It was not at once that she learned what Dock did over the hill, or whether he did anything at all but disappear for an hour and come back, swiftly on long strides and with a triumphant stare in his eyes. Autumn had come again, wind-driven and dusty and gray, like all the other autumns, familiar and old. There were a few pale harebells and patches of stunted asters and bushy goldenrods. Dock was cutting his wheat now, driving against the breast of a hard wind that tore at his binder aprons, swept the short grain over the platform, and rolled tumbleweeds over the field. Or when he drove with the wind it swept a part of the grain from his table apron and made funny patches of upstanding hair over the horses. It went over the hills with clouds of dust or it gathered the earth in small cyclones and shot it skyward. In every few rods he would stop, and Opal would see him savagely pulling mustards and thistles from the packer arms or tearing weeds from the slats on the aprons, or she would see him kneel to tie a broken sheaf. Then he would mount his seat again, and after a little way he would again stop and claw at the weeds. He would be swearing, she knew, cursing terribly in a hoarse voice, and down his lined face the sweat would be running and around his inflamed eyes and over his naked skin there would be black earth except where the sweat washed it away. All day long, from early morning until dark, day in and day out, he was there struggling against the wind and the weeds, striving to harvest a thin crop and making himself sick with his violent rage.

Sometimes she could see him furiously kick a part of his binder, in a maddened effort to break it, or she could see him crushing weeds with his heel as if they were live things. And for him, she reflected, they seemed to be alive, the winds and the weeds and the hills, and he seemed to think of them as actively opposed to all that he did. At any time of year, when he saw a weed close by, he would uproot it fiercely and crush it in his hands, throwing it from him as he might a slain squirrel or a rat. And he would glare at them as if they were watching him, as if they were springing from the earth in great numbers to mock him, to conquer him. Especially when they moved in a wind, tall and strong, did they draw his wrath, for it was then that they seemed to be things aware and eager, not unlike the locusts and squirrels.

Near the house, in the shelter of bushes, he had planted some mustard seed. He explained that he would let them get almost ripe, full in their pods and ready to hop out, and then he would yank them up by their roots. He would yank them up and kick all the hell out of them.

‘Just sillier and sillier, that’s all you are any more. You’ll be a real loony man if you live much longer in this place.’

‘Them weeds think they’ll grow right in my doorway. God a-mighty! I’ll just wait till they get good and set, the pods nigh to bust, and then I’ll kill them dead as a doornail.’

Weeds don’t think, good Lord! You’re crazy as a

bedbug. Come over and let me feel your head.

Dick, go feel your father's head for a crazy bump.'

'I'll fool them weeds, don't fret. They'll think the old world's come to a plumb end.'

'Go feel your father's head, I say. He's got a crazy bump.'

When the red sun was cut in half by the mountain's rim, Opal would go out to meet Dock as he came in. After drawing water from the cistern for his dust-coated horses, he would go to the stable and wait for them; and when they came up and stopped he would say loudly and with unmistakable pride: 'Eagle boy, into your stall!' and then: 'Ginger, into your stall!' and one by one the horses would enter and take their proper place. Opal marveled at his way with horses, so unlike the way of any other man she knew. There was gentleness in his manner, in his touch, and strange vibrancy in his voice when he spoke to them. He loved his horses, Opal thought, more than his wife, perhaps more than any other thing in the world, and at no time was he happier than when he could give them the best of hay and all the oats they could eat. He liked to watch them, to hear them grind their food, to curry them and keep their feet trimmed and to train their manes to lie one way. Always at bedtime he would go out and push their hay within reach and stroke their necks and speak a kind word.

Twice in a week now Quirl Avery hauled water past Opal's house. If he saw her he would shout a loud greeting, or if she would listen he would talk.

One afternoon he drew his team up near her door and called to her to come out. 'Hello there, crickety gee!' he cried, and Opal shaded her face and stared at his horses, two bony beasts with deep furrows down their lean thighs and sores on their ribs where the wired tugs had gouged their flesh. 'You're fine neighbors, you and Dock. Why don't you ever come to see a man in a thousand year?'

And he laughed a leering laugh that made Opal recoil and distorted his face until a bunch of skin nearly closed either furtive eye and until deep wrinkles ran across his cheek bones and over to his ugly ears.

'Why, we never go any place much, said Opal.

Quirl's face instantly sobered and lurching in his seat he looked swiftly this way and that.

'Well, I'll tell you, you and Dock's got to get over this funniness. You got to speak to a man and be sociable.' His first words now, as always, were loud with protest and his voice fell into a low caressing sound. 'I'll tell you, I speak to every person I see. When I go to the valley I say, Hello there, how are you? whether I know them or not. I say, Hello, how are you to-day? and if they don't want to speak, why, that's the way I do. Well, I'll tell you. Mebbe I don't speak if they're in a closed car and can't hear. But that's how I do.'

Again his laugh filled Opal with distrust and his face was distorted by innumerable wrinkles. When she began to speak, his face quickly sobered and his first words were almost a shout.

‘Well, I’ll tell you, I don’t like funny people. You and Dock’s got to speak. I’ll tell you, I figger you’re just as good as me and I’m just as good as you. I figger I’m equal to anybody and anybody’s equal to me. I speak right out. I say, Hello there ——’

‘When didn’t I speak? When ——’

‘Well, I’ll tell you, I don’t like funny people. You and Dock’s gettun too funny to suit me as neighbors. Dock don’t speak no more, just clams up. I can stand that just so long and then —— Well, I’ll tell you how I think. I think we’re all Christians, and if we can’t get along in this world, we won’t be able to get along in the next . . .’

On and on he talked, pausing for a few moments now and then and beginning anew with such loudness that Opal was startled; stopping to laugh in a way that made her flesh creep, talking in a voice that seemed to be breaking with anger or pleading in a leering way that frightened her. And as she listened and watched his face, or as she eyed his gaunt team, Opal strove to understand this strange man who alternated between a shout and a snarling whine. She thought of him vaguely as a trapped beast, as something that had been cursed and kicked and was too cowardly to fight and too strong to yield. In his manner there was distrust and there was a treacherous desire to be friendly, a betrayal somehow of the good will which he sought. Many people, even his own father, called him crazy and the black sheep, and he seemed to be fighting against this appraisal of himself, never believing that any one

would think him less than was told and mocking friendliness wherever he found it. And Opal was wondering, too, what had happened on the day when Dock went over the hill.

After a long while he paused, and Opal said: 'You need to talk about religion. Drivun shitepokes like them horses. There ain't no more religion about you than about a stick.'

'Say, now, don't you go talkun loud about what you don't know. I'm religious as any man. I'm just religious as you or any person you ever seen. Why, I'll tell you: if I wasn't religious and knowed you had twenty dollars on you, why, I'd just bat you side the head and take it. I'd bat you side the head quickern a wink. It's religion keeps me honest. I'll tell you, why, if I wasn't religious, you think I'd work honest like I do? Why, I'd go out and get anything I could lay my hands on. Anything I seen I wanted I'd take, and just bat a man over when he wasn't lookun. I'd just knock you over, even if you was a woman. Why, hells afire, don't think I'd be honest if I wasn't afraid. I got too much religion, that's it, and that's why I'm poor as a church mouse.' For a few moments Opal looked straight in his eyes, but his gaze broke and he twisted in his seat and laughed his strange laugh. 'Listen here! If I wasn't religious, why, I'd never speak to all them people. I'd just say, You go to hell with you. But if a man's religious, why, he's got to speak to folks and you and Dock's got to get over this funniness. You're too high mucky muck for persons what believes in

heaven. Well, next time I see Dock, I'll say, Hello there, how are you to-day? and if he don't speak, why, he ain't no decent Christian.'

That evening, Opal told Dock as much as she remembered of what Quirl had said.

'I see him over here,' said Dock, and was thoughtful for a long while.

'What did you do that day you went over the hill? He seems different some way.'

Dock drew dried aspen leaves from his pocket and chewed them or he stared at his gnarled hands with grease in their deep lines and bedded under their nails.

'What did you do?'

He looked at Opal, his pale blue eyes filling with wrath, his mouth twitching a little.

'What did I do! What does it matter what I done? You think I'm just a coward nohow.'

'Oh, don't be a fool. Did you pound him good or what?'

'Why, no. He wouldn't come out. I says, You low-down thief, come outen that house yourn and I'll mop your dooryard with you. But did he come out? Not on your old tintype. He just cowed liken a whipped pup and tried to talk it off. Come out, I said, and I'll yam all them teeth down your ugly throat. You can't steal my grain, I says, and he just laughed it off. If you ever steal another bushel my grain, I says ——'

'Did he steal your grain? Who said he stole your grain?'

'Hell a-mighty, if you'd use your eyes once in your life-long you'd see things without——Of course he steals my grain. He steals anybody's grain he can get his measly hands on. Didn't he steal three bushels oats Jack Nevel and didn't he swipe half a load right out Andy Larson's bin? Open your eyes, woman, and looken round you once in a long time.'

'Oh, open my eyes, hell! You think I'm watchun everything on this place? You think all I've got to do is watch your grain?'

'And didn't he go right down Rigby and steal half a load lumber right outen the lumber yard! Don't he eat beef cattle right offen the range all the time! Steal? Why, that's all he does to say about.'

'Well, what did he say when you called him a thief?'

'What could the worseless bum say? He was liken a dog with its tail snuck atween its legs. He says there's some mistake, Dock, that's all he said. He said, why, I never stole a thing in my life-long, that's all the liar said. If you steal any more my grain, I said, why, I'll make your neck crack liken a whip—'

'And what did Mag say? Did Mag open her head?'

'Hell, no, Ope, she never let off a single yeep. She just looked liken two cents and never yeeped. Without she kept her mouth shut I'd a-give her a jolt in her ugly face. Some women I respect much as any man, but she ain't no fit woman for any man to re-

spect. And when I think you'd stand all afternoon, just to blanney with that man ——'

'Oh, for Lord's sake! What would you a-done? You'd just said, Go on home, I ain't no time to talk with you. You'd just said ——'

'You didn't have to stand there a whole hour listenun to his silly chin music. You like to blanney away with these-here no-accounts.'

'Oh, dry it up! You make me sick and tired.'

Dock's wheat yield was small in this year, seven or eight bushels from the acre, and it was full of weed seed and smut. No man here had harvested more, he said, no man but Con Wote, that huge-nosed reprobate who irrigated his land with Antelope Creek and let the people below him drink the water after it had seeped over his place, through his cow corrals and pigpens, over his sheep pastures and past the stacks of manure by his barn. Dock's binder was worn out and there would be a new one to buy next year. He would pay two hundred dollars for a machine that cost twenty to make, he had heard, and for parts to the one he now had he would pay ten times their worth. Six dollars for a pinion wheel or twelve for an apron that was no more than a piece of canvas and a dozen slats. The farmer fed the world and for materials wherewith to plant and reap he gave all his profit, the big-bellied rich men sucking the blood of his labor.

In his heart a great bitterness grew with the years, a hatred of invisible people and forces that shaped

his life and ground him under in fruitless toil. He could find no words vile enough for these forces, these men. A farmer could sweat his heart out in pitiless labor, year after year, in the empty cycles of starvation and slavery, and for his efforts he had little to show but mustard seeds and smut. He could work his gnarled hands until they were only bruises and knots, he could break his body until it gave way like his binder or his drill, and what good could come of it all? But when Opal urged him to leave this place, to go elsewhere and start anew, he would turn upon her savagely and affirm again his will to conquer here or die. And after a cold bitter day in the field, alone with his thoughts and his dreams, he would come in with new hope warm in his heart and with fresh courage in his words. Perhaps he had thought of a new way to withstand the weeds or another method by which to till his soil. It little mattered. Or perhaps he had heard a new tale of conquest or imagined the secret of an old defeat. . . .

And then one stinging October day Lem Higley came over, almost trotting in his eagerness, and told a story that was to lift every farmer here to unforeseen altitudes of hope. The world had gone to war, two months since, and grain prices were on the jump and promising to go sky-high before the next harvest. Wheat would be two dollars, or three or four, no one could tell. It had risen twenty cents in the last week, and it had perhaps risen a cent for every minute that he had been talking. No one could say, he least of all, but it was rising so fast that a man had

little time to catch his breath and think. The world could fight without wheat even less than without powder and lead, and the kingdom of farmers at last was waiting with gates wide open.

'Hold on a minute, God a-mighty! You talk liken a blatherskite. For why do you think grain'll be ten dollars?'

-'Listen, Dock, mebbe I seem a little excited. But, say, I just got married, that's one thing. That's a undertakun to quail a man what's batched fifteen years. You knowed I just got married?'

'I don't care a tinker's hoot about your damn marriage. For why do you think grain'll be ten dollars? That-air's what I said.'

'Why, it stands to reason, Dock. What in God's world can it do but go to ten dollars or more? Them countries has all went fightun mad, that's what the papers says. Judas priest, they won't have no time to raise wheat. They're too busy shootun each other, that's the truth.'

'What countries? Do you know enough to say about, or is your tongue just loose?'

'Why, all them countries over there. There's Germany, I remember that, and England, I think, and the whole lickety splittun gang ——'

'And let me tell you, Lem. All them countries together ain't no biggern a man's fist. Ain't you never seen a map of Europe? Why, some of them-there nations ain't big as my ranch, or I'm a liar. Them whiffets can't raise the price a wheat, not without each man eats as much as a cow. So what you say don't matter enough to count on.'

‘Well, pay no mind to what I say, Dock, if it gets your Irish up. Them countries is big, for a fact they are. There’s millions of people in them places. They live over there thickern the hair on a dog. And they won’t have no time to raise wheat, not a lick of it. We’ll have to feed them till they kill theirselves all off and then wheat’ll come down again. That’s how I thought the thing out and it stands to reason. But they won’t kill theirselves off in no hurry, there’s too blamed many, I figger. I figger it will take a long time, long enough for us to get out of debt ——’

‘What they fightun about, do you know? What’s all them damn fools murderun each other for?’

‘Well, I don’t know. I thought deep about that, too. Some people like to fight and some don’t. Now the Irish is always fightun something. If they can’t find a man to fight, why, they knock theirselves around fit to bust their wits. The Irish has gone to war, I recollect now. I don’t recollect who they’re fightun, but they’re right after some one. Say, I guess mebbe the Irish started this war.’

‘That’s all of the little you know about it, Lem. Them Irish didn’t start no war. I’m half Irish and I aim to be as peaceful a man as you can find in a day’s hunt. Them Irish ——’

‘Well, mebbe they didn’t. Seems as how some one else started it this time. But I’ll tell you, Dock, the whole world over there’s took their guns and started out to kill.’

‘Them Irish never started it, Lem. You couldn’t make me believe that in a million year.’

'Pay no mind to the Irish, then. But wheat's to go clean out of sight, I can see like a mountain ——'

'I'll tell you why them-there damn fools is a-fightun, Lem, seems as how you don't know. It's them kings they have. Ain't you never studied history in all your days? Without you have a king there wouldn't never be no war. There ain't no war in God a-mighty's world, Lem, what wasn't started by a king.'

'I don't know, Dock ——'

'What one wasn't? Name it now.'

'Why, Judas priest, Dock, the Civil War, come to think deeper about it.'

Dock smiled tolerantly and looked at Opal. 'Why, sure it was, Lem. I ain't no big amount learnun, but I know some things well as any man. There was that man wanted to be king of the South with millions a slaves ——'

'Well, mebbe you're right, Dock. But wheat'll go out of sight, I know, or I'm crazy as a bedbug. It'll be ten dollars ——'

'Them nations oughten be killed, without they show some sense. You won't find them kings in the fight, Lem. They'll just set on their hinders somewheres. . . . And if them fools want to fight for kings, why, I hope they all get their heads plumb blowed off.'

'Well, wheat'll go out of sight, Dock, that's a fact. Let them blow their heads off, I don't care, just so wheat's a good price.'

'I always hated them damn English,' said Dock. 'Is them English in the fight, or don't you know?'

In Antelope now, there was school five months of each year. Dick and Bill and Emerald ought to be in school, Opal said, but Dock demurred. Perhaps they should, perhaps they shouldn't: no one could say. A little schooling was good for some, for some it was bad, and a lot of schooling was the ruin of any one. School taught men how to be dishonest in sly ways and it made them forget their religion.

'I'd talk! You ain't been to church for years and years. I'd talk about what school does!'

But he was still religious, Dock said; he kept his God and his church, even if he found little time for these. God told man to earn his bread by sweating, and when this was done he could find a Sunday now and then for church-going. Anyway, all sorts of scalawags went to church and prayed themselves hoarse, and other men there were, honest men and God-fearing, who never went to church and who never prayed from the cradle to the grave. Of these he was one. Children of worth, born in the right month, needed little of schooling, for no power on earth could stop them, once they set their mind on a thing. It was well to be able to read, to write one's name, but he had no time for the fancy folderols of high school and college. Educated men, he had learned, were all crooks: doctors who prescribed calomel under a highfalutin name and charged three dollars, lawyers who defended guilty men and sent

innocent ones to jail, bank clerks whose one ambition was to get a mortgage on a man's farm, grain-buyers who would cheat you black in the face. He wanted his boys to be none of these. They would be honest, hard-working farmers, possessing only what they earned and cheating no man. Dick might learn more than reading and writing, if such was her wish, for he seemed to be a little good-for-nothing. He had no more interest in farming than a rabbit, no interest at all.

'Why do you always pick on Dick? He ain't no good for this and he ain't no good for that! How do you expect him to show interest when you say he's a no-account? You'll have him afraid of his own shadow.'

'He's scart stiff of his shadder right now. If he gets outen sight the house he bawls fit to shiver his jaw. I'm ashamed I ever had such a kid.'

'Well, don't pick on him all the time. I'm sick and tired of it.'

Bundled warmly in wrappings, the three children rode one horse to school, five miles away. Bill rode before and guided the horse. They started early in the cold mornings and sometimes did not return until after dark, numbed by the bitter weather, but eager to tell what they had learned. Em would tell her mother of Bill's tricks at school: of how on one day he mounted the horse from a fence and rode off to see Jad Thurgenstowen, and of how on another he had filled his pockets with snowballs and rolled them down the aisle. For the latter mischief his teacher

had spanked him, and had made him gather the snow in his hands and take it outside.

'And he just set and pulled faces at her,' said Em. 'She didn't see him, but he pulled faces at her.'

Opal looked at Dock, but he had turned away to hide a large grin. 'Well, I don't hear you say anything. Is this the kind of a kid you intend to bring up?'

'What's there to say about? That's what I did when I was a kid. I pulled faces at all my teachers and worse.'

'And you want your kids to be just like you, that's all the little you want, I guess! You don't see Dick pull faces at no one, do you?'

'Why, no, Dick don't never see the funny side life. He's too much like you. He's too melancholy to pull a face at anything.'

'Well, if you can't make him decent in school I won't let him go. He can stay home and grow up in ignorance.'

'I don't care, missus, if he goes or not. So don't stand and glare at me. He'll be just as good a farmer if he never sees the inside a schoolhouse. He'll come outen the kinks, don't you fret.'

Bill with one eye closed grinned up at his father. He said: 'That's why I pull faces. I don't want to go to school.' After a little, he added: 'I told her my old man would beat her if she licked me again.'

'His old man!' cried Opal. 'He calls you his old man and you don't do a thing about it!'

'Now, don't jump outen your skin, woman. If he

wants to call me his old man, why, what's to hinder? I always called my father the old man. I'd as live he'd call me that as anything else.'

'And I guess you want him to call me his old woman! I'll skin him alive if he ever does.'

'Call her your Ma, Bill. There ain't no sight a sense to get your skin took off. Call her your Ma and call me your old man, if that's on your mind.'

When the hungry cold and blizzards of midwinter came, Opal kept the children at home and strove to teach them a little. Dick was eager to learn and would sit for hours with his book, spelling out simple words and reading a few lines, but Bill said he didn't want to learn: he wanted to be a farmer like his old man. He would thrust his paper and pencil into the stove and affect to have lost them or he would tear the lesson from his book; or with the pretext of having a bellyache he would go out into the bitter cold and spend an hour with his father at the barn. Opal grew sick with trying to teach him, fretting through the ugly days and saying sharp things to Dick, regretting her words and gathering Dick to her breast. She hated herself for loving one child more than another, for plotting secretly against Dock and his way with Bill.

She hated, with agony too terrible for her strength, the wintry loneliness of this place, the winds hunting overhead, the white fury of desolation. Sitting before the fire when Dock was out, she would listen to the mournful terror of the winds, running around and through the ugly shack of her home, and, while

staring with hopeless eyes at the veins standing out of her thin arms, she would feel weariness pressing upon her, closing around her. Her mind was choked with tired thoughts, old thoughts dying there, yielding no hope for brighter days and almost no wish for these. She would go on here, she could see now, always in the same way amidst the same ugly things. This place would be her home, even till death, and the only familiar things of her life would be these hills with their weeds and drouth, these children in their filth and rags, growing up to be like their father, brutal like him and with his futile struggle against a blind power. The dreams she once had would die or they would yield to his, no matter which. And with these thoughts torturing her mind she would moan a little or she would rest her face in her arms and shudder, and Dick would come over and pat her shoulder and sit on the floor by her feet. But when she thought of Mary, over the white and desolate hill in her small shack of thin boards, of Mary's patient face and pain-hunted eyes, Opal would chide herself inwardly for want of courage, for this hatred of her life that was in all ways less terrible than Mary's. Her children were all alive and healthy, with enough to eat, such as it was, and with enough to cover their nakedness. Her husband, too, whatever his faults, was not another Hype, not another Quirl: without the one's slinking laziness and the other's vagabondage and song. Not long ago, Mary had given birth to another child, a blind one that had lived only a few days, and Opal could

not imagine what her own horror would be if the babe had been hers. There was something too terrible in Mary's dead babies, one after another, filling the tiny graveyard on the hill. She was being punished, Dock said, for the sins of her forefathers; that was the simple truth of the matter. But Lem Higley had another reason. Babies were born dead or blind, he told Opal one day, because of a dread and nameless disease, Hype's disease, no doubt, got while sowing his wild oats.

'I know that for a fact,' Lem had said. 'Of course you'll not mention it. That's all the matter with them kids, just what Hype done in his wild days, and now that I think about it I figger that's why he's bald as a melon. He won't never grow no hair on that head of hisen, not in God's world.'

'Does Mary know why? Do you think she knows why?'

'Well, no, I don't think so. She seems to be right crazy on Hype, don't she? — or ain't you never noticed?'

'No, I never noticed, I guess.'

'Well, just notice next time you're in a fair way to. Just notice how she seems to think he's the old apple's eye. . . . Say, Ope, can you stand to borrow me a little flour? Well, you just notice next time and you'll say I'm right. You'll say her sun rises and sets in his old bald noggun. . . . Just enough for a good mixun, that's all I want. Notice next time, and, say, notice how she looks at him like he was president or something.

And Opal was thinking now, while Dick sat at her feet, of what Lem had said and of the graves of Mary's seven sons out on the hill. She thought, as she had thought many times before, of telling Mary that she should have no more children because of the nameless disease, but she recoiled from the pain that would come into Mary's eyes. Nearly every morning, Opal knew, Mary went out on the hill to look at the graves, to see if anything had been digging there, and often after dark she would go out and sit there for a long while. Perhaps she was out there now, with the frozen winds sweeping over her and with the solitude of her dead babes between her and the winds. And in the shack Hype would be singing nonsense to the three living children or he would be stretched upon the bed in sleep. Mary could not have many more children, and in this there was mercy, for she was so fragile and broken now that a good wind would blow her away. She was a strange woman, a rare woman, only one in a million, turning as she did for strength to all the lovely wild things, loving these with a passion that shook her, speaking gently under the weight of her bitterness and pain and never uttering a word of complaint. For such as Mary, in the kingdom of God, there would be a lovely place somewhere among the harebells and wild morning-glories, and God Himself might step down to take her hand. So it seemed to Opal as she sat up and laid her fingers on Dick's head. But for such as she, with her spluttering ways and hard temper, with her fret and hatred of this place, there

could be no spot very beautiful, none like the flower field Mary would have.

'Your mean mother won't get much of a place in heaven, will she, Dick? She'll just get what nobody else wants.'

'What's heaven, Mom?'

'That's where we'll go when we're dead. That's where we'll all be happy and won't have no pain or suffering. . . . Your Mom will just get what nobody else wants. . . . Dick, go out and find Bill. Say to him, Dick, his mother wants to tell him something.'

In this winter three trails were laid through the deep snow to Opal's door. Hype came often, to borrow a little flour or a cup of sugar, or to sit by the fire and talk. Lem Higley came, too, sometimes bringing with him his large-boned wife, taller than himself by many inches and with dull, unawakened eyes. And over the north hill Mag Avery would come to borrow, or to gossip and reprove, or to show her new baby, a funny little thing with large ugly ears like his father's and with a hideous birthmark covering one temple.

'Don't you loan that-air bitch another thing,' Dock said one night, after Mag had gone away with an oatmeal sack full of flour. 'I can't feed all the worseless people in the world. God a-mighty, you'll borrow me right outen house and home.'

A week later Mag came again. She took the warmest place by the fire, as if this were her own house, and under Dock's wrathful eyes she unswad-

dled her infant and changed its diaper, tossing the unclean one against the wall.

'He's a smart little whelp, this kid,' she said, looking sternly at Opal and then with softening eyes at her child. 'Smart as a whip, but all my kids has been smart right from the day they was born. Say, you don't happen have some old didies you won't reckon to use — just some old ones, you know. I keep my kids clean, just clean as the plate you eat off of. Any old rags, you know.' She lowered her face to the child and explored him with open mouth, moving her thick lips over its chest until it squeaked with delight, giving it loud vulgar kisses, placing her lips over its ear and making a sucking noise. 'Just any old rags you won't need,' she said, looking up for a moment. She shook the child gently, her large hands covering its fat ribs, or she held it close to her face and murmured silly things in a deep, throaty voice. 'Bubby-ubby-dubby,' she said, making it squeak and paw at her face. 'Wootsey-tootsey-dootsey, hickey-wickey-dickey. . . . You see that red spot?' she asked, and when she looked at Opal her face hardened and into her eyes came the searching, thieving look that Opal had always seen there. 'I don't reckon you know what caused that.'

A little bewildered, Opal glanced at Dock's wrathful face and saw him staring at the diaper by the wall. 'I don't think I got any rags I won't need,' Opal faltered, and looked again at Dock.

'I'll tell you how that come there. I birthmarked this kid, honest to God I did. . . . Wibble-bibble-

dibble, ooh ittle wascal! I'll wub ore ittle fat wibs out, ittle snooky-dooky-doll. . . . Ohooo, I'll eat ooh, tweet tho tweet! . . . Yes, you know how red the sun gets in the summer here when it goes down? Well, I stared at them suns too much, that's why that red spot's there. If you'll notice, it looks like the sun. Now I guess you noticed all your kids will have teeth with spaces atween them. That's because you're plumb crazy about your man here, you just look at him too much. A woman's kid is like what she looks at most. . . . You say you ain't got no old rags, no dish towels or anything? Dibby-wibby, ooh ittle wascal! . . . Ain't you got any Dock's old shirts or any old aprons, not a one? Why, land's name, what a-you do with all your old rags?'

Dock went into the bedroom and beckoned Opal to follow. 'Find her some old rags, great God! Find her some and let's get rid of her.'

Opal sorted her diapers and found a few with holes and yellow stains and tied them into a bundle. When she returned to the kitchen, Bill was standing before Mag, staring with one eye at her child.

'That kid's blind in one eye, do you know it? He's blind as a bat in that one eye . . .'

'Blind, hell!' roared Dock. 'That kid's worth a whole crop like yourn. He can lick all yourn right this day.'

'I learn my little boys to be gentlemen,' said Mag severely. 'My little ones is Christians. . . . If he ain't blind right now, you should ought to make him open that eye ——'

'He don't need that eye open to see you. He could see you mile off if he had only halfun eye.'

'I learn my kids manners, not to stand and gop at people what comes to see me. If I had a kid as impydent as that ——'

'Bill, get over here afore I break your neck!' With a devilish grin distorting his face, Bill moved over behind his father and peered around to thumb his nose at Mag.

'Ma!' cried Emerald. 'Looken Bill. Bill made a awful name at her.'

'My man and me, we try to be good neighbors,' said Mag, rising with dignity. 'We aim to live like the Lord told. I can't come over here without I'm downright insulted.' She took the bundle of diapers and walked heavily toward the door. 'I try to say things for your own good. If I had a kid what was gettun blind in one eye, I'd want people to tell me. If I had kids born with a harelip I'd want folks to say so right out.'

'Here's your stinkun didy,' said Dock. 'Take it along.'

Mag came back for the diaper, talking meanwhile. 'I says to my man, We ain't been over-sociable with Dock and Opal, I says, we ain't livun as the Lord told. I'm walkun over there right to-day, I says, and visit a little ——'

'Is there anything else you wanted to borrow to-day?' asked Dock, grinning cunningly and opening his eyes wide. 'Sugar or flour or anything to say about?'

‘I says, I’m set to live a better life right from now on, and to-day’s a mighty good day to start. I says, I ain’t got long to live mebbe — Yes, I did aim to get a tiny loan of ginger, but I can do without. My sick child can do without.’

Sometimes Lem came, or Hype, to sit by the fire and talk, and in their endless and unimportant tales Opal found brief forgetfulness, a few happy evenings scattered through the torment of a long winter. It was from Lem that she learned of the people here, of what they were doing and of their ways. Some of them she had never seen: Jad, and Susan Hemp, the strange old man across the river, Tee Wynn and Perg Jasper and Hansie Hansen, but for her all these came to be more real than many whom she knew. If she were to see them, here or elsewhere in the world, she would know them. She would know the strange old man by his long foul beard, Jad by his bushy eyebrows and fierce eyes, Tee by his slender body and by his way of talking to himself when others were around. She would know Susan Hemp by her starved, empty eyes and gaunt frame, and she would know Hansie by his manner of putting one hand on his stomach when he coughed. Perg Jasper she would know, beyond any doubt, by his noisy hatred of mountains and his love of Illinois.

‘He sure hates this place,’ said Lem. ‘Why, my God, when any one says them mountains is beautiful, why, that guy froths at the mouth. You wouldn’t believe it, Dock, without you seen him. He just froths like a dog with hyderphobia. He says

half the world is only mountains now and there's gettun to be more mountains every year. Mountains just grow up, he says, like anything else. Why, he says them mountains across the river has growed a mile since he come here ——'

'God a-mighty, that ain't true, Lem. That man's brain is gone back on him.'

'Well, pay no mind to it, Dock, but that's all of the truth there is to it, he says. I ain't decided whether he's crazy or not. He says he can prove them mountains grow like trees ——'

'Well, he's a liar, Lem, that guy's a liar.'

'I ain't decided, Dock. I ain't thought deep about it. But he says the world will all be mountains soon now. Why, back in Illinois, he says — that's where he come from — back there, he says, they didn't use to be no mountains, not a thing but flat plains, and now, he says, little hills is growun up all over there. In all them other States, too, where they didn't use to be a sign of a hill.'

'I'd be a plumb fool to think that. I'd as live think houses growed and dead sticks ——'

'Well, I'll tell you, Dock, there's a lot of things we don't know yet. Keep your mind open, that's my rule. Looken what science finds out every day your life. Who'd a-thought there was big animals crawlun around on the ocean miles and miles deep? Who'd ever a-thought that? Who'd ever a-thought there was people livun at the North Pole?'

'Why, I've always knowed that, Lem. I've always knowed there was more people right at the North Pole than right here in this country.'

'You've always knowed that?' asked Lem, astonished.

'God a-mighty, yes. My religion tells me that. Where do you think all them lost tribes Israel went to? They ain't never been found yet, not a measly one to say about. They're all up there, by the North Pole. And I'll tell you, Lem, that-air North Pole ain't been found yet and them lost tribes ain't been found neither.'

'Sure, that North Pole's all been surveyed. Come to think about it, no people could live there anyhow. Why, there ain't only one direction at the North Pole, not another direction but north. I ain't figured that out yet, but that's what science says.'

'I don't care a tinker's hoot what science says. When that North Pole is found, all them lost tribes will be found too.'

The men mused by the fire, each preoccupied with his own thoughts, and Opal was moved by sudden wonder for these things: the North Pole and the lost tribes and the mountains. Outside, a wild hungry darkness was upon the hills and blurred white was driving against the windows. All things, these near and those far away, were part of the great mystery of life which deepened, as the years passed, into black inscrutability. She stared at Lem's small body, huddled by the oven, and wondered at the restless torment of his mind that questioned all these strange things beyond his life. Of the lost people or the North Pole or the mountains she had never thought before, not in the way of to-night. And now each

was cloaked in its own dark meaning, remote and lost. She could see more clearly, after each new awakening of wonder, how very small her life was, and she could feel more vividly the force of things which in her early years had been meaningless. The mountains and the hills, no less than the people here, came more and more into life, each strangely and apart. The swift winds outside, the storm, with their moanings and shrieks, going blindly through the night. The dark loneliness of her house, the high, wide loneliness of the sky: these, too, somehow, were live things in their own way. Everywhere were the audible struggle and torture of invisible things with death crawling into their hearts. And she knew now, as she thought of Perg Jasper, why she wanted to live in a town with people near. In this place she was lost in a great unfriendliness of huge things, of mountains that cradled lonely winters, of winds that swept the earth and sky and emptied their moanings upon the stars, of hills that lay in their hard, flowing solitude. . . .

Out of another dark night Lem came white with snow to tell a strange tale of death. The old man across the river, he of the foul beard and unknown past, was dead. He had been found stretched out on his bunk, stiff as a poker, so stiff indeed that when his head had been raised his whole body came erect like a log. He was frozen so hard that none had been able to close his mouth or his eyes, fierce glazed eyes with lids like cold hard rubber, lips like cold hard rubber drawn back from his teeth. Jimmie Wheeler,

who lived straight across the river, had watched every day during many winters for smoke to rise from the old man's shack. And one day, two weeks ago, or perhaps three, he had seen no smoke, nor had he seen any on the next day and on the day after that. With two other men he had crossed on an ice gorge and had found the old man's door locked and his small window barred with maple poles. They had crashed the door in and had discovered him dead, dead on his bunk, fully dressed and as stiff as a wagon tongue. One of the men, Bill Biggers, thought the old fellow was still alive, swore he had seen breath like steam come from his mouth. And so they had made a fire and thawed him out, wrapping him in hot blankets and trying to pour hot water down his throat; but he was dead, dead as a doornail.

They had searched his shack to find some sign of his identity, but there was nothing, nothing at all but some paper thrust between two logs and covered with crazy writing. There was no name, no address, anywhere, not a picture even or an old letter. He was nameless and dead and doubtless forgotten long ago. Where he had come from, and why, nobody could ever say now. He had not starved to death because there was food in his shack, some salt bacon, some potatoes, and almost a full sack of flour. Above the door on its nails was his gun. Perhaps he had frozen to death or perhaps loneliness had killed him; or perhaps he had just gone to sleep while his fire was still blazing and had never waked up. None

could say. No one would ever say how the old man had died. But he was dead, as dead as a doorknob, and they had buried him in a snowdrift behind the house. When the snow began to melt, Jimmie said he would go again and dig a grave and lay him away forever. That would be the end.

'And I don't get no reward now,' said Lem. 'That old codger had ten thousand on his head, lay to that. But the law don't pay for dead men. Judas priest, they could never hang the old fool now.'

'You and me can't say to that, Lem. There can't no one say to that. We won't never in God's world know why that old man come offen here. Mebbe he was just sorrowun to death or mebbe he was plumb alone in life.'

'Mebbe he was a crook, too, what snuck off here. To my mind, Dock, mebbe that's all the old fool was.'

'Mebbe he was just sorrowun to death, year in and year out. I guess that's it.'

'No, I'll tell you, Dock. I thought about him off and on for a hell of a long time. He was a crook or a fool, one or the two. That's all the sense my mind can see.'

'Just a-sorrowun to death, Lem. That's the truth for any man's mind. Afore God, it's a funny world.'

'Why, it wouldn't surprise me a little if he killed his wife. Lots of men shoot their wives and light out like hell was after them. He killed his wife or something, don't you fret.'

'It's a funny world, Lem.'

'Now that old fool in Camas what knocked his missus deadern a fit. Didn't he lean out like a streak of light? In God's world, no guy never went faster till he got caught. That guy leaned out like the crack a doom ——'

'You and me can't say, Lem. Not for God a-mighty's sake we can't say. Sometimes I says, That man done wrong, and the next day I says, Who can say if that man done a wrong without he was in that man's place? You can think about life till you're blackern Toby's heel and you won't never see it clear like it is. I allow no man thinks deepern I do when it's my mind to figger a thing out. But there's things I can figger out and things I can't. Some things I can't, Lem, and some things you can't. Without you might say why that old man come here, you ain't no room to judge.'

'Mebbe so, Dock, mebbe not. But don't tell me he wasn't a fool. He was just that crazy he didn't know where his hind-end was. He didn't know straight up. First time I laid eyes on him I could see he didn't know straight up. His mind was all in a fuddle.'

'I ain't aimun to judge, Lem. If he sinned, God a-mighty will punish him and it ain't for us to say one or the two.'

As winter melted into spring, Hype came oftener, at any time of day or in the evening, and always with song in his mouth. When he came over the hill Opal could hear his tunes whistled loud and clear in

the cold air or she could hear his words when he sang.

'How's Mary to-day?' she would ask, and Hype would invariably answer: 'Mary? Oh, she's all right. She'll be alive when I'm dead as a fiddle gut. It's these unhealthy people lives to be old as the hills and persons like me what dies young. Another year or two is all I give myself.'

If supper were cooking, he would build up her fire and amuse her children, or after supper he would dry her dishes and talk of unimportant things.

'Your Bill is after my gal, do you know it? For a whole year now he's spooned her red. He just looks at her with one eye till she blushes rings around herself.'

'Don't talk so silly, Hype, round my kids. Such talk don't do them no good.'

'Why, every kid has his spoony fits. I was in love with a girl before I got my didies off. When I was Bill's age I would a-married if I could.'

'I guess so. I've heard stories makes me think so.'

'When I was twelve I knowed more about love than I do now. I was more in love at twelve I ever been since.'

'You don't help Mary wipe dishes. Why don't you wipe her dishes once in a while?'

'Did you never know Minnie Rapp, that old maid school teacher in Annis? She's married now. She's the one I was nigh crazy about when I was twelve. Her and Annie Poulson, another old maid teacher with one eye that looked like glass. Did you know

old Annie went bald-headed? She's the only woman I ever knowed went bald-headed . . .'

'I say, why don't you never wipe Mary's dishes?'

'Did you ever stop to think why women don't go bald-headed like men? I'll tell you why. It's the women ——'

'None of your dirty stories. Keep your dirty stories to yourself.'

'Did you ever know them Beal girls? Ruby Beal and that other what's-her-name. They was the nastiest girls ever went to school in Annis. Them girls would walk home from school singing the worst stuff a man ever listened to. I hear that Ruby's in Pocatello now, a bawdy girl or something. Jenny, that was the other one's name. I guess you didn't know them.'

'Hype, will you answer me one question?'

'Sure. I'll answer you a dozen questions.'

'Well, why ain't you never good to Mary like you are to me? Why don't you never wipe her dishes and cut her some wood once in a while?'

Hype stared at her for a few moments. 'Why, ain't you ever noticed no man's as good to his wife as to other women? I never seen a man and you never seen one. I can't say why, but that's the way it is. If you was my wife, I don't suppose I'd wipe your dishes in a thousand years.'

He would gather the oldest children around him and tell them yarns or he would sing nonsense ditties until they choked with laughter. All but Dick. Dick would stand soberly by and listen, sometimes smil-

ing a little. Or often Hype would improvise the craziest silliness, Opal said, that any one had ever heard.

‘On Tom Bugg’s place there was a sow
What et a binder and a plow!
Oh, she et a donkey and cow!
And there’s a hen, a minorky hen,
What et all the pigs in the old pigpen,
Oh, she et every pig in that pigpen!’

‘Oh, you big fool!’ cried Bill, recovering from a convulsion of laughter and striking Hype on his chest. ‘Say, hens don’t eat pigs!’

‘Oh, I went to a circus and by gum,
I seen a whale as small as your thumb,
I seen a spider as big as a house,
I seen a elephant small as a mouse,
Oh, I seen a elephant small as a louse!
I seen a man without any head
And he wasn’t alive and he wasn’t dead ——’

‘Ah, dry up!’ shouted Bill. ‘You say big lies, that’s all you say.’

‘Bill, I’d be ashamed! I’d be ashamed to speak that way to my betters.’

‘He ain’t my betters. He’s just a big liar.’

‘On the other side the world there’s a guy
What stands on his head when he wants to cry,
And there’s a woman what wears a skirt
Made out of porkypines and dirt,
And, Bill, you should ought to see her flirt!
And a Chinaman there has fifty toes
And a mouth that sets a-straddle his nose ——’

'Sing some true song! Them's all big lies.'

'All right. You kids all come close and I'll tell you a true story. This is what happened to me about a year ago, just a year ago to-night. It was a black night, the sky rainun pitchforks and rattlesnake tongues, the lightnun zig-twistun all over and the thunder bellowun like a bull big as a mountain and a million wild things in the dark all around me. . . . Well, it was so dark I couldn't see my hand before my face and I just walked by feelun with my feet, and I could hear live animals crawlun in the brush and I could hear their teeth and their claws and there was shivers runnun all over me, and there was a black trail behind me and I could feel wild beasts smell my coat tails . . .'

'Didn't you have no gun?' asked Bill, drawing nearer. 'Not a knife or anything?'

'Not a thing but my two hands, and them animals all around, lions and bears and elephants and tigers and crocodiles and some with yellow eyes and some with green eyes and some with red eyes — And then I lost my trail and I prowled through the brush on my hands and knees, and all of a once I seen something right before me and its eyes was two balls of fire and its tail lashed the brush and made big pines tremble like a wind was blowun, and it let off a awful yell and its mouth was as big as a wash-tub and its teeth long as butcher knives —'

'What did you do?' asked Bill.

'— and it roared loud as thunder, and when it stood on its hind legs it was tall as the trees and its

feet was as big as quilts and the hair on it was long as a man's leg and its muscles stuck out like saw-logs ——'

'What did you do!' gasped Bill.

'All of once I began to grow and I growed bigger and bigger and bigger. I growed tall as the trees and my hands got as big as houses and my chest got as big around as a flour mill and teeth growed in my mouth big as plowshares and I let off a roar that shook the earth. And then I just took that monster by its tail, and its tail was like a hairy log, but my hands was big as all creation, and I swung it round and round, knockun pine trees down and hills clean out of sight, and it roared till the whole earth trembled. And I swung it round and round till its tail come off, yanked right out of its body, and where its tail come off there was a hole in its body big as a house. And then I used its tail for a club and chased it over the mountains and the mountains shook under us and trees come crashun down. I chased it across the river and over the mountains, and then I begin to grow small again, smaller and smaller, until when I got home I was just like you see me now. And its tail got so heavy I left it back there on the dugway ——'

'Is its tail there now?'

'Sure, and it looks just like a pine tree . . .'

Hype looked down at the children and smiled, and with solemn eyes they stared at him, searching his face for the truth or falseness of his tale, believing and doubting.

XI

SPRING came early and rich with promise, March rains falling gently on the melting snows and adding to the store of moisture gathered from winter. At odd times Dock saw a newspaper and took from it hope that the war over the sea would be long and the price of wheat higher than any man dared think. He had a hundred acres of winter wheat and of spring wheat he would have fifty, or more if he could lease some land from the State. He was restive and eager and sure of victory in this year. His new methods of farming, he told Opal again and again, would make her eyes jump out of her head, and in her wonder grew with his words, and a faint hope. As soon as the snow had melted on the tallest hills he would go out, morning and night, to learn if his grain had winter-killed or to see if any weeds were yet coming through. He would dig into the earth to learn how deep the moisture had sunk or he would pull old tumbleweeds to measure the length of their roots.

He had become a scientific farmer at last, and from now on the weeds and drouth would find him a bad one to deal with. Plants that resisted dry soil had long roots, he had learned, and he would discover ways whereby to make the roots of wheat go deeper. Thistles had roots a foot long, and the roots of wheat were no more than three or four inches.

Deeper plowing would help, because slender wheat roots could not thrust themselves downward through tough sod, as did the roots of weeds, and the more soil was cultivated, the more unresisting it would be to grain. That was another thing he had learned. He had observed, too, that things which grew in dry places, cedars and salt bushes, for instance, had many roots and long ones and were never torn up by winds. Who had ever seen an uprooted cedar? All these facts he had discovered by looking about him and using his mind a little, and there was no telling what other discoveries he would soon make. It was by studying things simply, merely by watching them, that he learned their ways. Take weeds. Although he had pulled thousands of them, and although he had raised wheat all his life, it was not until he had watched both of these in a wind that his eyes had been opened.

'I set and watched to see if I'd learn a thing. And I see a wind yank a quakun asp right up, but it never tore no weeds up and I asked myself why that was. Then I pulled them weeds up and studied their roots and that's how I learnt what I did. Ope, I've got dry farmun down pat.'

'Go to work. You've talked for hours and my head aches.'

By the way of the spring he could tell that the season would be a rich one, with grain growing to a man's shoulder and with heads on it as long as a man's hand. No one could work forever without making in the long run, not if he watched what he

was about and had an eye for his mistakes. It was unreasonable to think that any man could work forever and not come upon success some day, in an unexpected time, perhaps in a year when he was ready to quit. Life was not that way, here or elsewhere, in any time or place. They had had their bad luck, God knew, years of it, and they were more in debt than they had ever been, but not far ahead there was a happy turning in sight. God had brought this war upon the world for some good reason, for some purpose a man might understand if he would think a little. Perhaps it was to let farmers the world over get out of debt, or perhaps it was for another reason more darkly hidden. There was good in it, somewhere. Those with faith still would find the good and use it, never doubting that everything somehow was for the best, never doubting eventual triumph if their minds were pure and their hearts set in God's way. There was a change in the world, a large change for the better, and in his being he could feel it growing as spring opened . . .

'Oh, in God's name, won't you never dry up! This is the way you talked every spring since we come here. It's always something better to come and every year is like every year that's past. It's always something better and something better. . . . It'll be the same and the same, year in and year out, just more weeds and debts.'

But Dock said no, he could never feel that way. In some years he had been wrong, but he would not be wrong all the time. 'God won't let no man go on

and plumb starve his guts out, not if he does his level best. I don't think God a-mighty would do that, Ope. I just can't think God a-mighty would do that.'

'You just talk to see if you can't hope a little. We can't win here, and so there ain't no use to talk about it.'

'Well, I can't feel that way, Ope. In all my bones I feel a change to come, a big change I can feel. Without I felt that I'd be set to give up right now. I'd never lift another finger, honest to God I wouldn't.'

Opal looked at him, at his sober face, at his honest, hopeful eyes, at his knotted hands and ragged clothes, at his body rounding and shrinking under the burden of empty years; and for a moment she felt emotion tightening her throat in a wish to comfort him, to go upon her knees before him and help him achieve this dream he was fighting for. But all this would do no good, no good at all.

'You don't get no sympathy from me,' she said, and her voice trembled a little. 'You know we'll just starve to death here and leave our kids on a weed patch. That's all the success we'll ever get. We'll just starve and grow old ——' And the thought of growing old in the loneliness here, with no promise in sight, broke her for a moment and she turned away. When she looked at Dock again her eyes were angry and wet. 'Oh, in God's name! I wish I was dead, Dock, I wish I was dead!'

'Now, Ope!' cried Dock, and he came quickly and

put his arms around her. 'This ain't no sense, Ope. Mebbe I wisht I was dead, too, sometimes, but that don't do no good, not a bit, Ope. I don't aim to give up, not without I die right in my tracks ——'

'I wish I was dead, Dock! I'm so sick and tired I wish I was dead!'

'Now, Ope, listen! There ain't no use to say that, no use in God's world. I won't give up till I'm licked black in the face. Not as long as God'll give me strength to do a man's work. There ain't no sense to wisht you was dead. Luck will come our way now. I've figgered things out so luck will have to come our way, without God a-mighty don't want it to. Listen, Ope, rain or no rain, our wheat'll make this year.'

'Oh, Dock, why do you say that? It ain't no use to talk like that! It would just be best if us and our kids was all dead. If we was all dead like Mary's children, that would be best for us.'

'Now, listen here!' cried Dock, and he shook her. 'Don't you never talk liken that! It makes it worse for me when you talk that way. I'm all set to win, Ope, rain or no rain. I can feel it in my bones this year, I can feel it in my mind and in all my body. I know new ways to farm now.'

Opal looked up, searching his face. '*New ways?* Oh, Dock!'

And with a shudder, of fear and of hope, she laid her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes, and in their lids and over her pale face there were little spasms of pain.

The spring was lovely in this year, lovelier than any other in Opal's memory, with the aspens putting out the most delicate green leaves and with the naked bushes slowly covering themselves until they were beautiful bowers full of cool dark recesses. Along the vales grass grew so thick that the bare earth was hidden, and in the air, over the world here, there was the breath of young life. When searching, day after day, for the lost nests of hens, she found wild flowers where she had seen none before: white blue-dotted forget-me-nots in secret places, silvery mats of pink lady-fingers with purple flowers, roses over the hillsides; and in a cove she came upon the bewildering beauty of the beard-tongues, lifting their profusion of colors high above the grass. On a hill to the east, where sheep had grazed little, Mary told her there had been a lovely garden of violets, and down by the river she had discovered the blue flax and some yellow columbines.

It was a lovely spring, Mary said, drawing her breath sharply as if in pain; too beautiful for one whose dearest things were asleep. She liked the fall and winter best now, when all things were drawing to death and when desolation was over the world. She could endure little of beauty now, for the wild flowers and birds brought pain to her heart, mingled in ways too hard to bear with an intense joy that was young once and now old. To hide in her ugly house, to shut out the loveliness of springtime, was the deepest need of her being. On the graves of her

sons the flowers were growing, on the very mounds, and near by were some bluebirds, building their nests. She was glad for the way of these, with their color and song at death's door; but when she went in early morning to see the graves and found the forget-me-nots wet with dew there and heard the birds call, she thought her heart would break.

Opal looked at Mary's white face, at its skin drawn bloodless over the bones, at the still horror in her eyes. 'I wish I could say something,' she said, and looked far over the green hills. 'I don't know what to say. A lot of times I've wished I was dead.'

'You have all your children,' said Mary. 'You have all your children, and you should love all the places where they have been.'

'I know. But sometimes I wish I was dead and all my children was dead. I know it's wicked to wish such things. But this year will be a lie, like all the other years since I come here. Everything will die soon, the flowers and all.'

But Mary said Dock would make wheat grow, with the new ways he had. The farmers here would soon raise wheat without rain.

'Not in my time they won't. This year will be like the last year and the year before and all the other years. All these things will die, all but the weeds, and the grain will shrivel up and die. And there'll be dust and grasshoppers and winds and the dead hills and loneliness. I know that's all there'll ever be in my time. Dust and weeds and the lonely sky.'

'They'll make wheat grow soon. I know they'll make it grow soon.'

Opal stared for a long while over the hills. 'I feel mad sometimes, in the fall when everything is dead and there's just a howling wind in the sky. I feel funny then, just like I'd run till I dropped and then cry my heart out. Just like I'd jump in the well and never let no one see where I'd gone. Oh, I feel in a awful way sometimes and I don't know what I'll do!'

'It won't be like this forever. You have your children and you should build a home for them as lovely as you can. Hype says Dock has ways now to conquer these hills.'

'Oh, but I feel old and I don't care now! When I come here I was lovely like the flowers, lovely like them. But I am old now, and I don't care. If the world ended to-morrow I wouldn't care. I hate the hills and the sky and all this country, more than I could ever say. I wouldn't be old if it wasn't for them. There ain't anything worth livun for, not a thing worth livun for now.'

Opal sank to the earth and lowered her face in her arms, and Mary sat at her side. Through her body ran shudders of despair and up her throat came dry, choking sobs. 'There ain't a thing to live for,' she moaned. 'In God's name how I hate this place!' She was shaken by violent anguish as she spoke, and then for a little while she was still, fighting her loneliness and grief. Mary circled her waist and looked with tearless eyes at a gray field where Dock

was harrowing wheat. Around her the birds chirped from bush to bush or they flew upward with glad calls, and almost at her feet, growing out of a scraggy buckbrush, was a lovely lily-like evening primrose, half hidden from sight.

When at work in the fields, drilling spring grain or harrowing the winter wheat to cover its earth with a coating of fine dust, Dock no longer sang in the old way of his tuneless song. There was silence where he worked, except for the creaking of harness or the flow of soil; and when he came in at noon or at night there was around him the silence of one who had discovered something beautiful and new. While waiting for his meals he would watch Opal with eyes reddened by dust, or he would study the calendars and almanacs, reading them again and again, comparing what they predicted of coming storms. And as Opal toiled by the fire she would glance swiftly now and then at his face, searching it for some sign of yielding, for some sign of a breaking spirit within. Though a little bloodless from ceaseless labor, from dawn until long after dark, his face was as grimly determined as it had been years ago. It was fixed and relentless. There was unyielding stubbornness in his posture, in the way he looked at things, as if no power but death could turn him from the plodding fulfillment of his dream. But there was more than these; there was a subtle triumph about him, a certainty of his new ways. And she felt a little warmth as she watched him, as she strove to

measure his hidden courage and his unused strength. And she thought of Mary, too, braver than she, and of all the people here who seemed willing to face hell in their terrible struggle to conquer these hills. There was, she felt more vividly now, something magnificent in their heroism that sustained them unflinchingly through empty years; there was beauty in the way they rose from defeat to sink again, again to rise and to hope and to work.

Perhaps it was the same the world over: autumn counting the year's losses and spring awaking hope, each December burying a dream under and each April giving birth to a more beautiful dream. Doubtless it was the same in Illinois or in Texas, in England or in China, to the far east or the far west, the world over. Some fought dry hills and some floods, some the mountains and some the deserts; some lost to smut in wheat, some to the bugs in cotton; some of them had little luck and most of them had none. The world over, it was the same: people fighting to take beauty from the earth and to build lovely homes, people dreaming and growing old with their dreams and sinking through age into a long sleep. That was it, Lem said: crazy dreams that would never come true and a deep sleep from which none would ever awaken. But people would awaken, in a far-off time, and they would find a new world made lovely and sweet for their use; they would find all their dreams true then, and life more beautiful than their dreams. People would rise to greater things in that far-off time, else there was

little need of bitter struggle here, little need to sweat one's life out and to work one's flesh to its bones, all for half enough to eat and wear and a tiny grave when the journey was over. . . . Lem was wrong, cruelly wrong, or perhaps he talked only to hear himself talk. None, who believed this life was the end, could find courage to give all the days he had to a grim fight against weeds and winds and dust. Only a fool would do that. There was a heaven somewhere to which people would go and find the fulfillment of their dreams. It was called heaven, or it was called paradise, or it was called by other names. . . .

Lem only talked to hear himself talk.

A person would die and sleep for a long while, and then he would rise, on some great and glorious morning, and beyond his feet into the blue distance would lie a place whose loveliness would take his breath away. There would be people singing everywhere, glad songs like the songs of wild birds, and in lovely gardens of flowers they would go in clean beautiful clothes, or through the blue air they would go on shining wings. And there would be such happiness as would make the heart ache with pain for a little while, until the eyes grew accustomed to the beauty, until the ears had heard all the melodies of reborn things, and there one would meet all his friends, each beautiful in a new and strange way. On a higher place, perhaps among blue clouds or coming down long stairs of gold, there would be the first angels in white array, white gowns flowing

from their bodies and a bewildering light around their heads. And somewhere beyond all these would be God, hidden in an awful white brilliance, and with eyes that could look far out among the stars. . . .

One could not understand why Lem talked in the silly way he did. He was trying to be funny, perhaps, or he wanted people to shudder at his nonsense. He believed no less than others in that wide and glorious morning when all would rise from the dust, but he liked to hear himself talk in the craziest way he could.

'Dock, why do you think Lem says there ain't no heaven and talks like a fool? Why do you think he says what he says every day of his life?'

Dock straightened and looked at her. 'What did you just say, Ope? I heared you say, but I never heared what you meant. I got the right wrinkle to farm this-here land now ——'

'I said why does Lem talk like a fool all the time and say there ain't no God and there ain't no heaven and there ain't no anything but this we have now.'

'He talks liken a fool because that's all he is, Ope. Ain't you never learnt he's only a worseless wind-bag? I'm jooberus that man'll ever get to heaven, talkun liken a loonytick day in and day out.'

'Well, without he believes, how could he stand to work and starve like he does? Never to expect anything better when he dies, never a thing better than what he's got right now.'

'Don't let him weigh on your mind, Ope. He's just outen his head all day long.'

'Do you think there's any one in the whole world don't believe in heaven? Is there a single one anywhere, do you think?'

'Not a last one to say about, Ope. Just afore Lem dies he'll believe deep as a well. He'll pray so loud he'll tear his lights out.'

'What do you think heaven's like? I don't remember you ever said.'

'Why, I think it's what the Bible says. It's right in the Bible what it's like, if that's on your mind. I can't recollect right off, but I could find it in a jiffy.'

'We ain't got no Bible, Dock, don't you know? We ain't had no Bible since we come here, not in all these years.'

'Well, I'll buy one next time I go to town. Why ain't we never thought to buy a Bible, do you know? Afore God it never seemed we ain't a Bible in the house.' He rose and began to rummage among the papers and cheap novels, now piled in a corner. 'You sure we ain't got no Bible? Seems like I seen one. . . .'

'Dock, do you realize we ain't been to church in nine years? Not in nine years we ain't set foot inside a church door.'

'I know it, Ope, I know it well as you. But I ain't had no mind for church. I ain't had no mind listen them windbags. It don't say in the Bible we have to go to church, not in the whole book it don't

say so. It says be honest and love your neighbors, that's all it says. I ain't afeared not gettun to heaven, not enough to say about. . . . You sure you ain't seen no Bible anywheres around?'

'Don't you think we should send our kids to Sunday school? They ain't never been once. They ain't never been baptized.'

'No, I don't, Ope. There's plenty time to be baptized. They can be baptized after they're dead, far as that goes. That's what they done to old Bill Shattuck and sent him to heaven when he never wanted to go. They baptized him after he was dead to the world. . . . I wonder how much a Bible costs, do you know?'

There had been a heavy rain early in May, but by late June the moisture in Hype's wheat land had sunk three inches below the surface. The lowest leaves were beginning to burn and turn yellow. Hype would have no crop, Dock said, because he had not learned to till his soil in the way a man should. He had plowed shallow and planted deep and turkey red would not stand deep planting. It was a delicate wheat for all its beards. Spring wheat would, and other kinds of winter wheat like gold coin, but turkey red should be barely covered. He had learned this much, God knew, after years of trial and loss. And he had learned to plow deep so the ground would hold its moisture, and over his fields this year he had a coating of dust that would keep out wind and sun. Rain or no rain, his crop

would make. He had such a stand of grain as no man had ever looked upon in a dry farming country and the soil was still wet almost to its surface. If she'd come along, he would show her. If she'd come out to the fields, he would show her the wonder of his new genius, but she was not to tell every Tom, Dick, and Harry about it. He had told a few, but not every fool he met. . . .

Hopeful and a little amused, Opal went with him. In a field of thick wheat Dock dropped to his knees and began to dig. He removed the coating of dust, and then to her astonished gaze he offered a handful of earth, dark and wet. Pulling up a bunch of wheat, he showed her its roots tangled in damp soil and he pointed to its broad lush leaves and counted for her the shoots which had sprung from a single stool. And when he rose he was trembling and his voice was vibrant when he spoke. 'You say I ain't no farmer, good God! Looken them fields and then let's hear what you say!'

And Opal looked here, and then there, as he pointed and she saw fields of unbroken green; and when she looked again at the grain by her feet, she saw no leaves burning, not even the smallest leaves near the earth.

'And you say I ain't no farmer, Ope! God a-mighty!'

Still Opal stared, wondering at this miracle of Dock's new way. 'But won't it burn up, like the last crop? Oh, there won't be no rain and it'll burn up!'

'God a-mighty, no!' cried Dock, his voice shaking. 'I've conquered these hills, rain or no rain. I ain't never had no coat a fine dust afore this year to keep the wet in. Never afore this year. I ain't never planted fall wheat early in August afore this last year. And I got the wrinkle to handle them weeds now . . .' Again he dug into the earth, crying over the wetness he found there.

'I don't know,' said Opal, watching him, wondering if this miracle were true. 'I can't hope for anything better than what we've always had.'

Dock stood up and drew a long breath. 'You oughten be Hype's missus, that's the God's truth. You should be the woman of some worseless man without you can help a little and not be just a splutter-heels.'

They returned to the house, Dock looking now and again at his grain, Opal searching his face. 'I'm sorry,' she said, and touched his arm; but Dock swore and told her to keep away. If he had to fight alone, why, he would, and he wanted none of her half-hearted sympathy. And when he won, when he covered these hills with golden wheat, he would want none of her silly kisses that would be a woman's weak way.

Every morning he went out to look at his wheat, and day by day in his eyes Opal saw the gleam of a waking triumph. He never told her what he found, whether his grain was burning or resisting the drouth, but by the loud way in which he spoke to his children and by the restlessness of his sleep,

Opal surmised that he was sensing victory. 'Bill, you old one-eyed farmer, what's on your mind?' he would ask; or, 'Dick, kick outen that melancholy and larrup your old voice up!' And Opal wondered, while among her doubts hope came again like an April morning.

June passed without rain and a rainless July was well along when one forenoon Dock vanished. It was not his going but the manner of it that made Opal feel acutely that something was impending, something strange and unwanted, though she could not imagine what. Heretofore, when Dock went away he told her where he was going, but this time he sneaked off swiftly and without a word. He had broken into a jog-trot as he gained the crest of the hill and started down. She remembered Ella Hansen and his undisguised interest in her, and she remembered little gallantries that he had offered to Lem's wife when she had come out of a frozen night many months ago. 'Bill, did you hear your father say where he was off to in that big of a hurry?' But Bill had not, nor had Dick.

The sun climbed to noon, and still Dock had not returned, and at mid-afternoon a horseman came up over the hill and stopped at Opal's door.

'Here's a man!' yelled Bill, bolting into the house and seizing his mother's skirt. 'Ma, here's a man wants to see you!'

'Oh, in Heaven's name, Bill!' cried Opal, slapping his hand. 'Won't you never learn no decent manners, shoutun like a hoodlum!'

'There's a man wants to see you!' howled Bill, and ran back to the doorway where all the other children were gathered and staring.

Brushing flour from her dress and patting her hair, Opal went to the door, whispering fiercely to her brood: 'Get back in the house, you kids! Ain't you no manners a-tall!'

The girls slunk back and Opal went outside. On a horse was a handsome man, neatly dressed in shining boots and clean khaki trousers and a rich flannel shirt. He raised a soft hat and smiled, and Opal stammered a greeting, conscious the while of her children gathering around her, all of them staring boldly at the stranger. He wanted to see Dock Hunter, he said; he wanted to learn if Mr. Hunter was interested in a combine, a new kind of machine that would harvest his grain and thresh it and deliver it in sacks ready to be hauled. Dock Hunter's grain, he said, was the best up here.

'My husband ain't home,' said Opal, and looked with shame at her children, unwashed and filthy in their ragged clothes. Jim, the baby, was balancing unsteadily and clinging to Emerald, his diaper fallen upon his heels, a sticky coating of syrup and dirt over his face and in his eyebrows and hair. . . . 'No, I don't know when he'll be back. To-night, I guess, but I can't say.'

The feet and legs of the older children were bare, the skin black and chapped, and the few clothes they wore were patched and threadbare and unclean. The man was looking at them, a little curi-

ously and with a smile, Opal thought, of faint derision.

'You have quite a family,' he said, and smiled with pitying kindness at Opal.

'Yes,' said Opal, and wanted to slap his clean, handsome face. He was too stupid to know that she had once been clean, too, and lovely to look upon, and that only this ruthless country had made of her what he now saw. Oh, if he could only see her as she once had been he would not now smile down at her in that pitying way!

'What's your name?' asked Bill, drawing nearer and looking up at the stranger with one eye.

'Bill, ain't you no manners! Come in the house this minute!'

The stranger smiled again and in a way that cut Opal to the quick. Gathering her baby, she fled into the house.

She sank upon a chair, and after a little she began to weep, not with tears, but in a dry, choking way that racked her with shudders of pain.

Bill came up and stared at her. 'Looken what he give me,' he said, and he showed his mother a bright new quarter.

Opal snatched it and hurled it through the open doorway. 'Don't you never take no money from men like that, Bill, or I'll skin you alive! Don't you never take a cent from men like that!'

She looked at her children, searchingly, as if only now had she become fully aware of their uncleanness and rags. . . . Ah, in God's name, she had once

been clean and lovely; a sweet thing she had been that men had wooed and given flowers to. Before she came to this wretched place she had been as fresh and lovely as women anywhere and her clothes had been beautiful and clean and sweet to smell. But now she was unclean and ugly and with no wish in the whole world of God but the wish that she might go to sleep and never wake up. Eight children she had that poured from the house like a swarm of dirty things in their made-over rags, that lived in a house as old and misshapen as a pigpen or a cow corral. The pen and the corral and her house, they were all alike, scabbed and stinking of old age. She looked at the rags of her old clothes scattered about the house, at her old pots and pans with cloths drawn through the holes in their bottoms, at the crumbling yellow scales clinging to the walls and at the chunks of earth sagging from the ceiling. In the whole house there was not a clean thing and not a thing that had not been worn out long ago. The chairs were awry on broken legs and the table was now nailed to the wall to keep it from falling; the stove top was splotched with brown rust and its oven door was wired to the frame; and from the partition that had once been between the two rooms Dock had long since taken many of the boards for a hogpen. Once she had been as beautiful, God knew, as women anywhere, and for her freshness and youth love had given her these things. Love had given her an ugly shack and eight dirty children and a cry for death.

And then she remembered the stranger's pitying eyes and his statement that Dock was the best farmer up here. Scorn for one and pride for the other grew full in her thought, and she stood up, looking around her with angry black eyes. She thought, for a moment, of cleaning the house, but instead she went into the fields to see again the miracle of Dock's new way. The wheat had large well-filled heads, and only its leaves nearest the earth were burning, and these only a little. Perhaps there *was* a turning in sight. She was stung again by thought of the stranger's pity, by Dock's statement that she ought to have been Lem's missus, that she was only a splutter-heels. Returning to the house, she sat for a long time, thinking of ways by which she could be a better mother and wife; and outside she heard her children playing and laughing in the dirt.

The day was drawing shut when Bill again rushed into the house, crying loudly that some one was coming, some one in a car that was zig-twisting all over the earth likely to break its neck. Wearily, after a little, Opal went out and saw a sight not less strange than Bill had promised. Coming up the narrow road was an automobile, swerving from side to side and jumping out of ruts, leaving the road and dashing over sagebrush and again finding the road and speeding onward. Opal's first thought was that a drunken man was driving, but her second thought was the horrible truth. Dock **had** **sneaked**

off and had bought a car!... With a grinding of brakes and a wrenching of the front wheels that nearly overturned him, he came up and stopped. The children shrieked and swarmed over the doors and tumbled headlong in.

'If this ain't a fine trick!' cried Opal, and her black eyes were terrible with bewildered rage.

'Only a second-hand Ford,' said Dock, sheepishly crawling out and facing her. 'But it's got a self-starter and a lot a do-hickeys. And, say, Ope, what did I tell you, I'd like to know! They're buildun a whole town just below Poplar and it's to be called Ririe.'

'I'd talk about towns, a big fool like you! You can just take that thing back to-morrow! You can take it back, I said...'

'Hey, Bill, you kids stop that afore you knock all the paint off. Won't you kids never learn a thing in all God a-mighty's world! Get outen there I said and I meant it!' As a barrage to her furious assault, Opal surmised, Dock was affecting anger. 'Afore I skin you alive, you damn kids!' He began to examine the car for scratches, his ears alert.

'You're the biggest fool alive! Where's the new house you promised me? I guess you think you'll have a car while I live in this dirty shack! I guess that's what you think. We ain't in debt enough already ——'

'Now, Ope ——'

'Now, Ope, you big fool! You can take it back or I'll blow it to hell! I'll burn it up, that's what I'll do!' She stopped, hoarse and choking.

'Bill, get away from there afore I break your neck!'

'We ain't in debt enough already and we ain't got enough things to buy! You're the biggest fool God ever made.'

'Now, listen, Ope. There ain't no use to fly offen the handle and shout liken a crazy woman. I'll buy you a new house, right this fall I'll buy one.'

'Oh, yes, you nice little dear! You'll buy me a house just like the last one you bought. You'll buy me some new clothes and furniture and we ain't got money to buy food to eat.'

'You don't talk liken a woman with sense,' said Dock, a little mournfully. 'You don't know wheat'll be a awful price and I got the best crop on the bench. You don't know that and you rant on. . . . You don't know them elevator men said to me, I heard you got the best wheat crop in the wide world. The best what was ever growed, they said. And every last man down there wants to buy my crop so bad his teeth aches.'

'No, I don't know it, and neither do you.'

'You don't know them things, and you talk liken your head was empty as a old cradle. Sure I'll buy you a house, and that ain't halfun I'll buy. A house and furniture and milk cows. . . . Why, every farmer up here is bought hissself a car. I stand to buy a new car afore long and a combine——'

'Oh, in God's name, rave on! We'll starve to death and then mebbe you'll stop your chin music for a while.'

That evening, with the children gathered around him, Dock told of his trip and of what he had seen. Just beyond the last hills of Antelope a new town was being built and it was to be called Ririe. A flour mill and two elevators were almost completed and there would be stores and pool-halls and a post-office. All these were for the people of Antelope, and there would be in Ririe some of the largest grain-buyers in the world and grain elevators so large that Opal would stare till her head ached. It would not surprise him if Antelope before long controlled the wheat price of the country and if millions starved when crops failed here.

‘You won’t never learn,’ said Opal wearily. ‘You just go on with your silly dreams.’

She ought to have seen him learning to drive the car. For a fact, she would have laughed herself sick. He ran over chickens and pigs and almost went into canals, and at one time he ran through a barbed-wire fence and knocked down an acre of wheat.

‘You seem to think that’s smart, to knock down a man’s wheat what he’s worked hard for.’

‘I couldn’t help it, Ope. Why, that damn car just hopped outen the road and run lickety belt over the wheat afore I knowed a thing to say about. It’s a God’s wonder I didn’t run offen the dugway and drown in the river. I guess you wouldn’t a-cared enough to notice.’

‘I guess I would been as well off as I am now.’

Before going to bed, Dock went out to look at his car and to cover it with horse-blankets. Through a

window Opal saw him turning on lights and measuring the distance they were thrown into darkness, or she saw him sitting in the seat, grasping the wheel. When he entered the house he said, 'I got that-air car for you, God a-mighty,' and he grinned at her for a few moments before stooping to unlace his shoes.

The next morning, followed by his oldest children, Dock went out to the car. After wiping some dust away and momentarily effacing some scratches on the front fenders by spitting on his fingers and rubbing them, he drove around the yard, his children following and shouting.

'Let me drive,' said Bill, who had alertly watched every movement of starting the car.

'Let you drive! Without you leave this car alone, I'll larrup your hide off.'

While Dock ate his breakfast, Bill searched the dooryard for his missing quarter, and when his father disappeared over a hill to look at his grain, Bill ran to the car and climbed in. Without hesitating, he turned the key, stepped on the starter, and pulled the spark lever down. Then he stepped on the clutch, pushed the long lever forward at his left, and opened the gas. The car leapt forward, and Emerald screamed for her mother as Bill sped straight toward a field of ripening wheat, over the sagging wires of a fence, over some huge bunches of wheat grass, and into tall grain that threshed its heads against the car and bent under with a sound of rushing water. Opal came from the house and be-

gan to scream, and the little girls screamed, and Dick ran over the hill to find his father. Around and around, in a circle Bill went, standing and clutching the wheel; and when Opal came near she saw, even in the terror of the moment, that one of his eyes was tightly shut. Around and around, the front wheels twisting and wrenching, the tall wheat falling under the car and tangling in the spokes, the threshed kernels scattering over the fenders.

'Bill!' screamed Opal. 'Stop it, Bill!' But Bill had forgotten how to stop it, or he had quite all he could do to keep the car from turning over. 'Bill, shut off the gas!' Then the world was dizzy around her and blackness filled her sight. When her sickness passed and her vision cleared a little, she saw again, as through an unfamiliar haze, the car moving endlessly round its circle and Bill grimly clutching the wheel. . . . She saw Dock coming in a run and a thought of his rage sickened her. Shudders of terror ran through her when she saw his face, darkly distorted, his eyes maddened, his mouth slobbering tobacco juice. He leapt into the car and drove it back to the house. Opal ran after him, white and terrified, her heart breaking with prayer for her son; and as she ran she saw Dock jerk Bill from the car and strip off his ragged trousers.

'Don't you hurt him!' she gasped, staggering up and clutching his arm. 'Don't you dare beat him!'

Dock cursed horribly and cut a stout branch from a serviceberry bush. 'I'll make his hinder smart liken' pepper in his eye! God all-mighty, I'll learn

that kid to pay a mind to what I tell him or I'll beat his daylight's out!

'Don't you hurt him!' implored Opal, standing white and tense between father and son. 'Dock, if you beat him I'll jump in the well!'

'Jump in and be God damned! That kid'll pay a mind to what I say or I'll break every bone in his body! Leave go, or I'll give you some . . .' He pushed her roughly away, and Opal fell, and moaning with unendurable agony she buried her face in her arms. When she looked up, after a little, Bill was standing very pale before his father and Dock was bellowing at him. 'Say you'll mind me or I'll whale you black and blue! If you don't say it ——'

'Bill!' cried Opal imploringly. 'Say what your father asks you to!'

But Bill, looking unflinchingly at his father with one eye, gave no sign of yielding, no sign of fear.

'Say it!' thundered Dock, and he shook the child so hard that Opal thought he would break his neck. 'Say it afore I skin you alive!'

'Bill!' implored Opal, and she crept toward him. 'Please, dear, say what your father asks! Say it for Mother, won't you?'

Although Bill's pallor deepened a little, he only shook his head and held his father's eyes unwaveringly.

'Afore God, Bill, you'll say it if I have to hang you alive!'

'Say it for Mother, Bill! Don't be such a stubborn boy, dear. Say it, please.'

Without looking at his mother, Bill again shook his head.

'By God, you will say it!' roared Dock, and seizing Bill's arm he dragged the child toward the scraggy aspens in the cove.

Shuddering and moaning, Opal stumbled after them, and behind her came the other children, shrinking in terrified silence. When Opal saw Dock get a rope and tie it around Bill's neck she screamed and fell forward on her face. . . . When she slowly awoke, as if coming out of a horrible nightmare, she first heard Emerald crying and then she heard Dick imploring her to rise. She looked around with wild eyes, hardly knowing where she was; and then in a vivid flash she saw Bill hanging from a tree and she saw his father standing by him. All the strength of earth seemed to gather at once into her being, and she rushed forward, blinded by fury, but going unerringly toward her goal. She struck Dock a savage blow on his face, and then pushed him with such power that he staggered and fell; and as he fell she kicked him. Then she raised her son until the rope was limp, and Dick ran up and untied the knot. Bill was still conscious; and although his face was purplish, it had lost none of its unyielding stubbornness and his one eye that looked at his mother was so devilish and cunningly knowing that she shrank a little and cried aloud.

For many days Dock was gloomy and deeply ashamed. He would go out to the wheat that the

boy had flattened and try to make the largest heads stand again, and when he came in he would stare at Bill for a long while. And Bill would stare at his father, a little impish grin of triumph on his face.

'When was that kid borned?' Dock asked one day of Opal. 'We must a-been mistook in the date.'

'September twenty-first. I wrote it down somewhere.'

'It couldn't a-been September, Ope. There ain't no stubborn people ever borned in September. All my life-long I don't recollect one.'

'Well, that's when it was, anyhow.'

'I guess it was September twenty-second. That would make him a October kid. Now that I think a little, I would swear it was the twenty-second.'

'Swear from now till doomsday and you won't change it none.'

'You was all twisted in them dates, Ope. Now I think about it, I knowed you was all twisted at the time. Right now I can remember well as it was yesterday. . . . Have we them old calendars around, do you know?'

'All your talk won't change it. I know when my kids was born. Dick was born October fifteenth and Ruby December twenty-fourth, just the day before Christmas, and Garnet April sixth, and Jack August seventeenth, and Amethyst October seventh, and Jim June twenty-sixth. And Bill and Emerald, they was born September twenty-first.'

'Them dates don't sound right. We won't never

know now just when them kids was borned. You say we have two what was in October?’

‘Dick and Amethyst.’

‘That can’t be right. Amy ain’t like Dick, not a bit. You got all them dates twisted like I knowed you would.’

‘Talk like a fool if you want to. Just talk like a fool.’

‘You say Bill and Em was the same day? That ain’t right neither, Ope. Them kids ain’t like to say about.’

‘Talk your head off, but you won’t change things none.’

For a little while Dock was thoughtful, perplexed, striving to remember.

‘I guess I know the trouble now, Ope. Bill was borned right on the line, that’s how it is. He ain’t a September kid and he ain’t a October kid. He’s betwixt and atween and he’s plumb ruined.’

Opal gave no answer and Dock was silent again.

‘Do we have any more kids on the line that way?’

Opal gave no answer. Dock brooded for a long while before he spoke again.

‘Ope, you got to stop milkun that heifer on the ground or she’ll dry up. Don’t you know it dries cows up to milk them on the ground?’

‘Milk her yourself, then.’

‘Why don’t you give them beesluns the pigs way I told you? . . . Don’t you know milkun a cow on the ground makes her bag all swivel up?’

‘I said, *milk her yourself.*’

'Like I ain't enough to do without that. You don't seem to care a tinker's hoot we starve to death, not a tinker's hoot ——'

'Oh, shut up and go to work!'

'You ain't no missus liken Lem's woman. That's been on my mind to say for a long time. You ain't no fit woman for a farmer, not in the least way you ain't.'

Opal turned on him with sullen eyes and quivering lips. 'Oh, in God's name! This is all I hear from one day's end to another! I ain't this and I ain't that. I ain't like Lem's wife and I ain't like Hansie's wife and I ain't like Jim McHenry's wife. If you're sick and tired of me, say so, and I'll pack up my kids and get out!'

'There ain't no use to get up in the air, Ope. I just want to learn you. I aim to get rich here, and there ain't no sense to milk a cow on the ground.'

'And there ain't no sense to buy a car when I live in this dirty house, and there ain't no sense to buy a combine when all your kids is barefoot!'

Dock went over to her and folded her protesting body in his arms. 'We're both just fools, Ope, that's the God a-mighty's truth. You just write down the kind a house you want and all the clothes and things and I'll buy the whole shootun bang next time I go to town. Why, I wouldn't give you for hundred women liken Lem's wife, Ope, not without I'd lost all my wits. Not for all the women on the bench . . .'

Opal raised wet eyes to his face and her arms went up and around his neck.

Dock's spring wheat burned until the kernels in its small heads shrank, but his winter wheat withstood the drouth and ripened into a fair yield. He sang again at his work, and his way with Opal and the children was thoughtful and tender. Santa Claus would come in this year, he said; the old devil had never come to Antelope, perhaps because the snow had been too deep or because he did not know there was such a place in the wide world. But in this year he would come and he would need a dozen reindeer to draw his load. Yes, he would bring a sleigh and he would bring dolls and candy and whistles and Heaven alone knew how much else. He would bring presents for this year and for all the years he had missed. But Christmas was a long way off, four months nearly. Why couldn't he come at once, asked Bill, before the snow got deep and while he could travel the roads? And where did he find all his presents, and did one Santa Claus deliver to the whole world in one night? How big was the world, anyway, and what was on the other side of it, and did any one live beyond the mountains where the sky came down? Did Santa have any children of his own, and, if so, did he give all the best things to them?

'Don't ask so many questions, Bill. Them things you wouldn't understand without I talked a whole week.'

Did he crawl down stovepipes because people locked their doors, and didn't he make a terrible racket getting into a house that way? Why did

people lock their doors? Why didn't he use horses instead of reindeer, and what were reindeer, and where did he find them? Could reindeer travel faster than horses? . . .

'Yes, yes, that's why he uses them. Them reindeer goes over the whole world in one night. Now don't ask no more fool questions.'

'Where does he live when he ain't runnun his bobsled?'

'At the North Pole, Bill, and them's all the questions I kallate to answer. Skin out and get your Ma some wood.'

Sometimes on a Sunday Dock would drive his family over the hills to give them a little pleasure trip, he said, and to let Opal see what other farmers were doing here. By one farm or another he would stop and point out the owner's stupidities. . . . This was the place of Tom McHenry, the brother of Jim, a no-account fellow if God ever made any. Opal saw some rolling hills covered with Russian thistles among which was a thin stand of wheat, and up in a barren cove she saw a dirt-roofed one-room shack bulging in its corners and with its door sagging awry. On a line were the ragged clothes of Saturday's washing. Instead of plowing his ground, Dock said, Tom disced it, and ere long, in next year or the next, he would be forced to give his home to the weeds. . . . This was Jad Thurgenstowen's place. Opal leaned forward and searched the buildings and grounds for some sign of the terrible lonely man who cursed his God. Jad's soil was no good, as any man

could see by the torchweeds that covered it. Jad knew as little about farming as a child, and year after year he got what the little boy shot at. He had a crazy spot in his brain, else he would never use that kind of binder and drill. 'He just cusses horrible,' said Dock. 'Nobody don't never go to see him any more. One of these days he'll die in a cussun fit.'

This was Jim Arle's place, and that round fat woman waddling like a duck was his wife. Poor Jim was drawing swiftly to his end, for in his neck he had a huge cancer that stunk so bad now that none could live with him in the same house. He slept in that lean-to by his stable.

'Poor old devil,' said Dock, and when he felt Opal shudder he put an arm around her. 'I'm afeared Jim ain't got long to live. . . . You can see, Ope, God is been good to us in spite of all we've went through.'

'It's this place has done all this to these people,' said Opal. 'It's this place has made Jad and Jim and all the others like they are.'

'I've got ways to farm now, rain or no rain. God is been good to us, Ope.'

'All these people has changed since they come here. It's this place kills them by inches.'

'We ain't no room to complain, Ope. You don't see grain like ourn, not a acre do you see. . . . See that-air small table out in the dooryard. That's where Jim eats his meals now.'

'Let's go home, Dock. I don't want to see no more.'

'They say Maud Arle runs round with other men now. I ain't seen her, but I heared she does. Lem says she'll soon run off and leave Jim alone.'

'Well, let's go on. Why do you just set here and talk?'

The place far up on the southern mountain-side belonged to Susan Hemp, the gaunt woman who lived alone and worked like a man, and a mile farther lay the ranch of Jon Weeg. Opal saw a tiny place framed among aspen groves, a small plowed ridge here and another golden with grain there; and rising from trees she saw a cloud of pale smoke. Susan was another of the mysteries here, a lonely being who had come out of a dark uncertain past to hide up there among the trees. Her provisions, Dock had heard, were bought at a mail-order house and delivered in her box by the roadside. She never threshed her grain, but gathered it in sheaves and fed it sheaf by sheaf to her chickens and hogs. Sometimes she raised turkeys, and from a small spring, he had been told, she had built a pond for ducks and geese.

'I've always wanted to see her,' said Opal.

'Well, mebbe some Sunday we'll run up and see her. But she don't like people, I've heared, and like as not she'd as live shoot a man as look at him.'

This was Ed Wynn's place, and over in the shack on the hill there Tee Wynn had lived and studied the stars. Tee was now locked up in the asylum at Blackfoot. Last year they had locked him up and his shack was empty now, except for old papers and

funny drawings of the sky. Many names were scrawled on the walls, and on a table he had catalogued the universe, and in the backs of old books he had recorded the names of stars that had fallen. 'I guess he was crazy enough, but I don't aim to say. Mebbe he was no craziern them what put him there.' Ed's wheat, as she could see, was not bad at all, and Ed himself was one of the real farmers up here. There were Ed and Jack Nevel and Bob Scott and Ole Humbersum and Andy Larson —

'And Dock Hunter,' said Opal, pinching his arm.

'I count myself the best. You'll see.' These whom he named had learned the secret of dry farming from him. They plowed deep, they planted winter wheat early in August, and they covered the earth in springtime with a coating of dust to keep the wetness in. They were conquering the weeds, too; conquering these hills inch by inch.

'But look at all the others. Look at all that won't conquer anything and just die here. Hype and Lem and all.'

'I know, Ope. But some men win and some lose and that's about all I see in this-here old life. It's the same, I kallate, the world over. Some give up and some don't never give up.'

'And some don't have enough sense to give up.'

'One or the two, if that's how it seems. And them what ain't got sense enough to give up is them what wins.'

On a high hill Dock stopped to look over the country and to point out all the farms lying near.

The wheat to the north, of which she could see only a small golden patch, was Andy Larson's, and the wheat below it was Jimmie Wheeler's. It was straight across from Jimmie that the strange old man had lived. The yellow hills far away to the west belonged to Tom and Alma Hess and the wide yellow slope of stubble yonder belonged to Old Man Reid. That was Widding's to the south and east and that place in the long hollow was Curly Later's. Ed Harring's lay out there on Antelope flat, and up the creek, where she could see all those stacks of hay, was the irrigated land belonging to that reprobate, Con Wote. Did she remember what these hills looked like when they came here, years ago? A desert of sagebrush and weeds, and look at them now! Look at the thousands of acres of golden grain where none had thought grain could ever be. Could she think, could any one think, when looking over these hills now, that labor had been in vain or that men here would ever be conquered?

'But this is a good year. Wait till next year and you won't see a thing but weeds and dust.'

'Bad years will come, Ope. I don't say bad years won't come. But we'll raise some grain, even in bad years.'

'One good year in a lifetime, that's about it.'

He trembled a little, she thought, as he pointed out other places and talked eagerly of what had already been achieved here. His pointing arm trembled and his words were a little broken. She wondered at his love of this country, at the passion

shaking him now; because for her these hills were gray still and changeless and lost in the timeless solitude of dead things. One fruitful year might come, and after a long while, another; but these scattered years would only lure men on and on until they were broken and old. In this way or that, by drouth or by frost, this desert would preserve its soil for the weeds and its loneliness for the hawks. Against its invisible power men would beat their lives out, and winds would dig their dust from graves and scatter it over these hills. After a time, a few years or many, there would be only fields of tumble-weeds, rolling before winds, and clouds of earth driven upward to blind the sun. Old deserted houses with decay living in their silences, barns sagging in rottenness, cisterns filling level with the ground. Old roads choked with weeds, old trails leading to the dark holes of forgotten doorways. . . . Such, at least, was what she had always thought. But now she doubted, for there was a golden dream over these hills, a courage invincible and sweet. There would be bad years, but perhaps no year utterly barren, like years of the past. She laid an arm across Dock's shoulders and again looked around her at the hills of Antelope.

'I ain't been much account as a wife,' she said.

Dock gathered little from his spring wheat, but his winter wheat yielded twenty bushels from the acre. Two thousand bushels at one dollar and fifty cents per bushel: Opal could figure it up and look as

astonished as she pleased. 'Figger it out anyhow you can and your old eyes will bug out. It's three thousand dollars, I might as well tell you now.'

'Three thousand dollars!' cried Opal, and stared at him.

'Three thousand dollars ——' Dock stopped, his emotions choking him. He paced the floor, trembling, beads of sweat standing on his forehead. 'God a-mighty, Ope!'

'Now don't get all worked up. I guess expenses will take most of it.'

'Twenty-five hundred dollars, clear and above-board, Ope. I've figgered it out a million times. I'n hire it hauled off and I'n pay seed and it's twenty-five hundred dollars left.'

Bewildered and doubting, Opal sat and watched him as he paced the room, a great emotion shaking his body, sweat running in the lines of his face. He could hardly believe it himself, he said; at the last minute he had expected a frost or a hailstorm, or he had expected to find himself waking from a dream. But the wheat was out there in the field, one thousand sacks piled and waiting for the trucks. Only an hour ago he had gone out, expecting to find a few sacks or none at all; but it was there, for he had counted the sacks time and again, and he had weighed many of them to learn their average. Perhaps she did not think he was so worthless now. Hype's crop and Lem's had been failures, eaten up by the drouth and weeds, and no one on the bench this year had got more than twenty bushels from

an acre. Never before had any man taken twenty bushels from an acre of this desert. 'I told you all along I'd be the best farmer up here. I said I'd win. I told you so all along.' He could now pay a part of his debts and he could buy a new house, a frame house that would be the first of its kind here, and he would buy so many other things that it made him laugh to think of them all. He would buy her a washing-machine and a separator and some cream cans, and he would buy her clothes as lovely as those she once had. He would buy a wagonload of clothes for her and the children, and for her new house he would buy curtains and a rug . . .

As he talked, tears gathered in Opal's eyes. 'Don't buy too much or we'll be head over ears in debt again.'

'You said we'd starve, and I knowed we wouldn't. All along I knowed we wouldn't. It's to keep fightun makes a man win, just to keep fightun and never say die. You said I was a worseless dreamer, and it's dreamers keeps the old world on its legs.'

Opal was deeply shaken, for Dock's eyes were misty and never before had she seen him moved to tears. If the glad thing was true which he told, she wanted to kneel at his feet, or do some little silly thing, that would confess the unworthiness that had been hers down through the struggle. She wanted to go off alone somewhere and weep a little and think. . . .

'Just figger it all up, Ope. I'll pay a thousand on my debt. Lumber and all for a house will cost five

hundred, a washing-machine cost sixty, a separator sixty-five, a machine to sew is seventy, and a rug is forty. How much is all that, I wonder? Anyhow, we've got abundance for all them-there and for clothes and food. I wonder how long the war will last, do you think?'

The trucks came soon to haul Dock's grain to Ririe, and they returned loaded high with materials for Opal's new house. He would build it, Dock said, as soon as he got his winter wheat in, and he worked with feverish haste, rising long before dawn and working until after dark. For many days there was a steady downpour of rain, but he never stopped his work, and at noon and at night he would come in, drenched and stiff with cold, his hands covered with mud clawed from the drill. He grew thin, almost haggard, and Opal's heart ached as she sat in her wet house and thought of him, going endlessly round and round in the rain under a dark sky. He would toss in his sleep and talk, or now and then he would laugh strangely, in gurgling triumph that rattled and sank in his throat; or he would sit up and curse his teams and then lie to deep sleep for a long while. And Opal would kiss him gently or she would slip an arm under his neck.

One day Lem came over, pleasurably excited, to tell of Andy Hansen's death. Andy had been caught in the huge belt of a threshing machine and torn almost limb from limb. So many bones had been broken that when he was lifted, his arms and legs had hung like those of an old sawdust doll.

Dock was thoughtful for a little while; and then he said: 'It's a funny world, Lem. One of us might be killed any day. We never know if we'll see another sun come up or not.'

'What will Hansie do now, I wonder? Him with a bellyache and all the work to be done and his missus said to be astraddle Con Wote's lap half her time.'

'God knows, Lem; I don't.'

'He'll have to stand up, I say, and get to work.'

'It's a funny world, Lem, and the longer you live the funnier it gets. We don't know if we'll see the sun come up or not.'

'Judas priest, Dock, that Hansie ain't no sick man. Some one should ought to kick his hind-end so hard he'd straighten up and harness his team. Let your mind think about it, Dock, and that's all he needs.'

'He'll wake up liken a mad bull one these days. He'll wake liken old sixty and tear plumb hell around him.'

'Old Con Wote sneaks over there and when Hansie's asleep, his missus and Con goes out to the stable. I seen them one night kissun fit to bust theirselves.'

'Hansie'll wake up, don't you fret. Con'll go hellety belt to rock and ruin. Hansie ain't no fit man to fool with he gets good and woke up.'

When the winter wheat was planted, Dock began to build the house. He knew little of building, he said, but perhaps as well as any other man he could

make boards stand upright and saw holes in them for windows and doors. It would be only a three-room house, but it would not leak and it would have a clean smell. Opal helped him, steadying boards while he sawed and handing materials up to him on the roof. And Dock sang again and talked of what they would buy with next year's crop. They would buy more hens than a man could count and a dozen loads of lovely things for the house. . . . He had got his winter wheat in too late, and that was a pity. Hereafter he would summer fallow half his farm, plant his winter wheat in August, and then it would make, rain or no rain. He had spent too many years learning to dry farm in a scientific way . . .

'The war will stop,' said Opal, sucking a finger that had a splinter under its nail. 'Then you won't get no big price for wheat.'

'We'll see, Ope. That war mighten run for years. That's my hope, leastways. Anyhow, we won't starve no more, without I forget my new ways to farm.'

He had bought clothes for all the children and a second-hand cutter, and as soon as the first heavy snows fell the oldest went to school. Standing against the dashboard, Bill proudly drove, and huddled warmly behind him were Dick and Em. Off they went through the gray gloom of falling flakes or over the dazzling snow, in hazy mild days or in days of bitter cold, against sharp winds and blizzards that swirled in blinding storm and darkness. They would lose their way, Opal cried, and

perish, but Dock grinned, and said that if Bill got lost he would open his other eye and drive straight home. These were not city kids and they could find their way back like a cat. Had she heard what Lem did with his old tom that ate all the robins on his place? He put a sock over its head and carried it to the ends of the earth, but the cat came home and with another bird in its mouth. Bill was like his old man. Blindfold him and lead him in a thousand directions, and he would find his way back with his eyes shut.

‘Like you found your well years ago.’

‘Never mind that well. I know what I tell you, Ope.’

Lem came over, as in former years, but his tales were old now and Opal was wearied by his endless talk. Some man in Chicago, or elsewhere, was going to fly to a star. ‘That sounds like a lie, Dock, but it’s the God’s truth. There’s folks on them stars and he’s to fly there in a airship or something. Wouldn’t surprise me he did.’

Dock looked at him pityingly. ‘Folks on them stars, you said?’

‘That’s what science says, Dock. On that star called Mars, it is. There’s a world called Mars, you know.’

‘How’s Hansie gettun along? Is he woke up yet?’

‘Not yet, Dock, but I see signs I ain’t figgered out. There is signs, Dock, but he ain’t woke up yet.’

Later, on a day in early spring, Lem came to tell the story of Hansie’s waking. The story was not

very clear in his mind, perplexing at best, but something terrible had happened. Hell had broken loose and no man could doubt it if he would look at Ella's face. It was an awful face to look at. Something around her mouth, around her eyes, and a long thin scar on one cheek. At the first coming of spring Hansie had been seen out in the fields, doing odd jobs and wandering here and there as if in search of work. Even then he no longer carried one hand on his stomach and in his eyes there was a growing glint. And next, something terrible had happened, but no man could ever say exactly what it was. Con Wote came no more, that was certain, and instead of keeping her door always open in the daytime, Ella now kept it shut and the shades down at her bedroom window.

'I been told Con had his nose busted flat on his face, Dock. Just as flat, I been told, as a pancake. I figger Hansie just stood up straight one night and when Con come over he got hit like a pile-driver. And then I figger Hansie beat his missus till she couldn't set up. I figger it all out that way.'

'You say Ella has a scar on one cheek?'

'Right across her cheek bone, Dock. A scar long as your finger and red like proud flesh. Hansie must a-hit her with a singletree, Dock, or something like that. And, my God, Dock, you should ought to see her eyes!'

XII

THE snow melted swiftly under warm winds and warm rains fell over the earth. The hills were darkly wet and sweet, and after a storm passed there was a golden haze shimmering over the purple depths of mountains and sunlight lay in silver fire upon the river's mist. This was one of God's years, said Dock; one taken from the innumerable years of heaven and given to man. Paradise, as a man could tell, would be made of years like this one, millions of years like this one in endless procession through time. There would be vales brimming with wild flowers and lovely trees overflowing with the song of birds; and through valleys of flowers rivers would go, rivers with waves tossing the gold of sunsets. There would be rivers flowing golden out of dawns and they would wind in silver quiet through fairy-lands, gathering cargoes of shadows as they ran into twilights of blue.

'All them is Mary's thoughts,' said Opal. 'You just say what she told last summer.'

'Well, that's what heaven will be like. I don't need Mary to tell me, if you notice.'

For a few moments Opal looked at him earnestly. 'Do you think we'll be old there like when we die? Or will we all be made young again?'

'God'll let us choose our own age, Ope. That's what I think. We can be twenty or we can be sixty, whate'er we like.'

'You don't think I'll be just a ugly old woman then and have to live forever like I'll be when I die?'

'You can be young liken when you married, Ope. You'll just say to God you want to be young and He'll let you be young as you want. There wouldn't be no sense to make you old without you wanted to be.'

On another day they went over the hills. Dock gathered some flowers and told Opal to smell, and when she lowered her head he pushed her face among them. With a foolish grin he placed a blue flower and a white flower in her dark hair.

Opal laughed a little strangely and into her pale cheeks came a wave of color. 'You'll be silly,' she said. 'You'll be silly in a minute.'

'I used to do that way long time ago. It's funny, if you notice, how we grow old and forget we was ever young.'

'We ain't walked like this since we first come here. We'll be silly as young people in a minute.'

'We grow old and it don't seem we was ever young. It seems a hundred years since we come to Antelope. Work and work is about all the little our days has meant.'

'People work and get old and they don't care. They don't care then.'

'They just forget they was ever young.'

'Years pass like days and they're old before they know it. They just get ugly and cross and they don't care then. . . . Dock, I wish we could be young again for a little while.'

'Why, you ain't old, Ope ——'

'I feel old. I feel old as these hills. The years has just slipped away and I ain't had anything but work and loneliness. I wish I was young again and not ugly and all.' She looked far away over green hills and Dock saw that her eyes were wet.

'Why, Ope! You don't want to cry liken a baby, do you?'

'No,' said Opal, shaking her head. She drew her lower lip in and set her teeth upon it; tears gathered on her dark lashes and dropped to her cheeks.

'Ope!' cried Dock. 'What is it, Ope?'

'Nothing,' said Opal, fighting her grief, looking down the years to the time when she was lovely and young. 'I'll be all right in a minute.'

Dock laid **his** flowers down and took her arms, his eyes searching her face. 'Ope, what is it?'

'It ain't anything,' said Opal, and shuddered. 'Just to walk with you this way . . . all these flowers and . . . Oh, I'm just silly, Dock!'

'Why, Ope,' he said; and he sat upon the earth and drew her to his lap. She trembled in his arms and wept, great sobs torturing her until she moaned. Dock caressed her hair and spoke words of comfort and hope; and after a long while he drew her close to him and kissed her hot lips.

As the flowers of spring turned downward, one by one, to dust, the flowers of summer, harebells and golden rays, came out of the earth. Dock had harrowed his fields to protect them against drouth and

said that in this year, rain or no rain, his wheat would make. A better time had come, he said, now that he had conquered these hills. The coves were white with the blossoms of serviceberry and chokeberry, and even an old and scarred bush near Opal's door hung loveliness along its limbs. If no hailstorms came, no frost, he would harvest such a crop of wheat as no man had ever heard of; and he would buy so many lovely things that Opal would walk in happy bewilderment to the end of her days. For the house he would buy a stuffed chair and a bed that would shine like gold, and he would buy lace curtains for the windows and a door with a glass panel. If she wanted a hardwood floor, he would buy that, and anything else she could think of. Some day they would have a new and larger car and she would learn to drive it. They would have a well driven five hundred feet to water, like Jack Nevel's, and Opal could have running water in her house and an ivory sink. And what else would she want? She could have a large dresser in the bedroom and a thick warm rug on the bedroom floor. 'Anything you want, Ope. I'll buy anything you want.'

And Opal said nothing, for what she wanted most, a small and lovely home in the valley, she knew he would never buy. He would buy her a brass bed or a chair or a rug, as if these could fill the loneliness of her life. A better year this one might be, and years might come that would be miracles of sweet and lovely things; but there would also be years stricken with drouth and choked by weeds and dust. He

might raise wheat in any rainless year now, but the war would soon stop and they would get little enough for their labor. She knew; and a few furnishings, an easy-chair or an ivory sink, would never reconcile her to the zeniths of solitude and the rolling hills of death. He would try to bring smiles to her face, youth again to her heart, by talking endlessly of things he would buy and of crops he would reap. Grass that was tall, bushes hung with white, flowers holding their colors over the hills — these could not make her forget the empty years that had gone or the empty years that might come. One of God's years, he said, glorious and full; but they might wait long for another year from His hand. They might wait long, and between the two lovely years would lie a desert of struggle and dying things. . . .

'My grain is thick as the hair on a dog, Ope. I don't care if it rains or not, my wheat will make. . . . Ope, there's lilies, I guess it was, all over them hills.'

He thought to comfort her with talk of flowers, to make her forget the years lying ahead, over which would hang a hot gray sky and through which would sweep the loud winds, gathering their ruins. He wanted her to forget the green things of spring that would turn yellow in the dry days, to forget the clouds of dust in August that would shut out the sun. He might talk and talk and talk, but she would never forget. She was old now, and it was little she cared what he said, what he did. These hills had got her, broken her, and she would never care now. Let him talk of God's year, if he would, and let him

buy a chair and a rug and let him bring an armful of flowers . . .

‘Ope, Hansie is workun fit to kill hisself. Something busted loose in his insides and he’s a man now.’

He could be cheerful, and out in the fields he could sing his songs; he could build greater dreams than his last, and at night he could turn to her with a kiss and tell of them. But in the next dry year, or in this, when he went to find his grain burning or its kernels black with smut, he would fall again into old ways and he would curse his God. He would live in his terrible silence, broken only by oaths or a muttering in his sleep. His smile would be a snarl and his hands would be hungry for cruel deeds. She knew, and all his words could not make her forget. Out of this year they would go again into the old blind ways of struggle and pain, and inch by inch they would yield to the invisible power of these hills. And at the far end of their lives she would be another Grandma Avery, sitting in black rags, and he would be another Grandpa, hunting the hills for his lost dreams and talking in the wind . . .

‘Ope, I’ve conquered them hills at last. Why don’t I hear you speak, I wonder?’

And then one July day, ashamed of her weakness Opal went again with Mary among the wild flowers. White cloud-mountains filled the east and outlined shimmering zeniths against the blue or lifted fragile spires with a pale golden flame along their edge. Upon Opal’s face a breeze was cool, followed by

flowing waves of warmth. The small wind dropped to the earth and crawled among the grasses or it rose again and made the aspen leaves swarm like flashing live things held by their tails. Out in the fields a wind was riding upon the grain, and the tall green wheat was flowing in long, even waves, with shadows rising and falling and sheets of light running swiftly into waves of darkness. The grain bowed under heavy flowing shadows and rose covered with light, or its depths were torn open by cross-winds and it laid open green valleys that closed and flowed again as the wind moved over it.

Never in all her life, said Mary, had she seen more wild flowers and birds than here, and never such sunsets or such deep purple as gathered on the mountains in twilight. To bear God's beauty was hard, for one with eyes to see: the rainbows set from mountain to mountain and the blue loveliness of evenings after a rain and all the green things trembling with bird-song.

The lilies were gone now, but the hills and vales held the white blossoms of wild buckwheat and of bedstraw, and everywhere, in this year as in another, were gardens of purple asters and roadside daisies. Northern hills were aflame with the golden rays and scarlet gillias, growing tall in waves of flowing color. Half-hidden in grass were harebells, each drooping alone on its slender stem; and shaded by bushes or growing in dry places, over all the unplowed hills, were the geraniums with delicate petals like the wings of butterflies . . .

'I guess we'll both go on here,' said Opal, watching Mary lift a drooping harebell until it cupped the sunlight, wondering why she had never before seen in this Antelope country the beauty that Mary saw. Mary said yes; and she said, too, that she loved Antelope now, all the hills and coves around her home and every lovely aspen tree. All these things were familiar and old, a part of her life, and she wanted no new place where the ugly and beautiful would both be strange. 'You're like Dock,' said Opal. 'You both love this place. I wonder why you love it and I hate it.'

Mary said she should love it, too, for this was her children's home; and she led Opal to a hillside where there were acres aflame with Indian paint-brushes and evening primroses, and where, among thick growths of buckbrush, were tiny golden cinquefoils and blue gentians with their bells full of purple shadows. She could never be sure, Mary said, which of wild flowers to call most lovely. It depended on her mood. When sadness of years was upon her, she liked the lone and weary harebell best, but when she felt bewildered and happy, as now and then she did for a little while, she liked to go among the gentians or roadside asters, or she liked to wade knee-deep among the bushy golden flowers of the rabbit brush and torchweed. Sometimes she liked to lie on the earth with her face against the fragrant wild sweet peas, or again, after dark, she liked to wander where the fireweeds held their sullen flame in the night. In one mood she loved the silver aspens, and in

another, when praying for strength to bear her pain, she would go among the pines over by the river and listen to great winds talking in their boughs.

‘And when I feel crazy, like I was losing my mind, I want to go over on the ledge and stand there and watch the river foaming along its gorge and see the hawks sailing down the sky. And sometimes I want to throw myself off and feel myself falling down and down.’ Opal shuddered a little and thought of the dark empty well by her house. ‘Or in the fall of the year, sometimes, I want to jump out of bed and go running with the winds, over the mountains and through the valleys and over the mountains, on and on. Or I want to run through darkness to the river and float down it to the sea and then float around on the sea until I drop off in a red sunset.’

Opal began to feel something strange in things about her, in the way the sun looked down and in the solemn stillness of flowers and trees — something weird and terrible. Mary’s eyes were terrible to look at, and in her voice and quiet way there was something that chilled Opal’s blood. Mary’s thin hands seemed lifeless, and her frail body; only her eyes lived, eyes that saw lovely things among shadows of the dead.

‘I guess we’ll both go on here. There ain’t a thing else to do.’

‘And sometimes,’ resumed Mary, walking like a ghost at Opal’s side, ‘sometimes in the dead of winter I want to be a white thing running through the storm . . .’

But Opal strove not to listen. In her ears there was a soft humming, and her eyes saw only blurred green patterns of the hills, and aspen groves shimmering like pools of green. She heard Mary's feet soft on the earth and Mary's voice softly coming and going among the mad things she wanted to do.

When her house came in sight, Opal stopped and turned. 'We'll go on here,' she said, and the shimmering hills for a moment were hard and clear. 'You'll be another Grandma Avery, and that's all I'll be, in rags by my front door.'

But Mary shook her head. Opal had much to be happy for, a new house, all her children alive and well, and a husband second to none in Antelope. Her children would teach her to love this place. And she added, 'The world gets more beautiful every year for me, Opal. I think God makes the world lovely for old people.'

When August came, the fields of wheat over Antelope were gathering the golden sunlight into their heads. Dock spent his time poisoning squirrels, or, a little later, he would go out each morning to drive flocks of blackbirds from his grain. He did not begrudge them what they wanted to eat, for they were his friends, but he hated their silly way of clinging to one stalk until they broke it, and he wished they might learn to pick up what they scattered on the earth. But he was happy and loud with talk, and, when not busy with squirrels and birds, he would potter round the house, making it more

comfortable in one way or another, or he would move with restless eagerness from room to room, trying to sing or stopping to speak a few words.

'Looken them fields, will you!' — and he would go to the west window and gaze over the Antelope country, north, south, and west. 'Not a drop a rain since May. Ope, come and look.' And smiling a little in her weariness, Opal would go to him and look at the thousands of acres of wheat, turning slowly into golden loveliness. She had looked often during the last weeks: at the hollows darker and slower to ripen, at the ridges ripening swiftly; but she had looked always with dread for the ruin that the power of this country might scatter at any moment. There might come out of the west a marching storm of hail, or out of the remote sky there might come a white frost. The grain might be filled with smut or it might be laid flat by a strong wind . . .

She knew that Dock was distressed, more as the days passed, by her want of enthusiasm for the achievements of people here and for his victory, above all others. In this year he had made wheat grow and ripen without rain. . . . And so sometimes, when he was in the house, she would go to the window and look out and say that Hansie's grain seemed to be ripening more quickly than Lem's, or that the fields on the southern mountain were still green; and Dock would come to her side and explain why one patch was green, one golden, and in what way one man was a better farmer than another.

'You don't think I'm interested,' Opal would say,

looking up at him. 'I am, but I'll never love this country like you do.'

'I know, Ope. I can't begin to say how them-there hills is with me. All that was best in me is out on them hills. Them hills is liken friends, liken my horses and machinery. I know the last turn and crook well as I had made them. . . . I just can't say, Ope, how I feel.'

'I know, dear, I know.' She heard him breathing deeply and she felt his arm tremble a little under her touch.

As the wheat kernels filled and hardened, Dock became more restless, and Opal guessed that he, too, was living in dread of hail or frost. He studied an almanac and watched the sky, and in cool evenings he would go outside to see the number and brightness of the stars. 'It seems colder to-night,' he would say; and if Opal gave no answer, he would add: 'Is it colder or do I just imagine things?'

During the days he repaired his binder and harnesses, and toward evening he would test the ripeness of his grain by shelling some in his palm and he would offer a few large full heads for Opal to wonder at. He never said what his yield would be and Opal never asked, but she saw that many of the kernels were shrunken and that many of the heads were small. 'I can't seem to see a thing wrong with that-air grain,' he would say, shelling some in his hand and then looking doubtfully at her. 'Don't it look plump and all right to you?' Or again he would say: 'That grain looks thick as any I ever see, or what do you think?'

But no frost came, though the nights grew cool, and no hailstorm came out of the west. He would begin cutting on the morrow, he said one afternoon, and he would cut night and day until it was all down.

'Ope, I feel sort upset, I don't know why. Let's go for a little walk, would you mind?'

Opal smiled at his anxious face and went with him up the hill toward Hype's farm. They sat down under a mahogany and Dock began to speak out of the great emotion that filled his being. He spoke again of his father, mightiest of all pioneers, who had been the first to conquer the dry rocky country around Annis, with its growth of sagebrush and dwarfed cedars and wastes of sand. 'And when I come here, Ope, I aimed to do what my old man done afore me. I won't give up, I said, not without God is against me, and I won't give up for that neither. I'll fight, I said . . .'

Opal pressed his arm, wondering at the emotion in his words, wondering at the dream that he had carried through the long years here. 'I know,' she said. 'I know how you felt.'

'And you said I was a day-dreamer, Ope. You said I wouldn't never win. From first to last, that is all of the hope you ever give me.'

'I know. I ain't been much account as a wife. I tried, but I ain't been much account.'

Dock bowed his face in his arms and for a long while he was silent. Opal knew what great emotions, of glory quite and of sadness, were shaking

him deeply in this year of triumph. He was a little afraid, she knew, to believe that he had won, that the other men here had won or were winning; he was afraid that he would wake from a dream and find before him, not fields of gold, but grain burnt to the ground and acres of weeds, and hawks crying out of the sky. And as she sat with her cheek against his shoulder and felt shudders running through him, she went back down the years, remembering the first of starvation and loneliness, and the others that came after, one and another and another, each with its trial and loss, each adding little by little to Dock's victory, and each with her growing hatred and fear of the invisible power of Antelope.

All of these years, as she looked back and explored them for their dead things, seemed to be a long nightmare out of which she had come to find herself old, a blind wandering through darkness toward a light that would show only that their life, the best of it, had been spent in bitter ways. Down by the old house were symbols of unfulfilled dreams. There was the well, now full of darkness, and there were the three dead trees of an orchard that Dock had once planted; and by the broken window of the house stood a dead fir tree with brown branches. Among all these was the old house, tumbling in ruin now, its roof falling in and its door hanging from leather hinges, its floor chewed by rats and its corners alive with the nests of mice.

And yet, in her hatred of it there was strange tenderness; it was there that she had spent the best

of her womanhood; its two rooms were ghostly and haunted by echoes of her children and the tiny running of little feet; and of it and its ways her memory was full of things that would never die. At times she almost loved it more than her new house, with its clean walls and unfamiliar parts; almost more than she could love another home, no matter how beautiful and no matter where. She hated this country, but she understood what Mary had meant. For the ugly things down there, the cistern and barn and yard, each lovely or dying bush, and the playground of her children — these had grown to be a part of her with roots deep in her being. She wanted to leave here and she wanted to stay, she hated and she loved. Perhaps if she went away she would be haunted by these things and memory would turn back always to find her happiest days here. Upon these hills she would hear again the laughter of her children, playing in the dirt, and too vividly she would see them as in the years when pain and loneliness were breaking her heart. . . . But no matter, she would have to stay. Dock would never leave Antelope, now that he could make wheat grow without rain, now that he had won. He would go on, fighting smut and drouth and weeds, and through the gray years of dust they would grow old together. There was no other way now.

She put an arm around Dock and spoke and he raised his head.

‘A silly dreamer, you said. That’s all of the hope I ever got.’

'I was no account as a wife, dear. I've seen that a long time now. And, listen, I guess we'll stay here and build our home, for there don't seem a thing else to do. And we'll make it as lovely as we can.'

Dock turned and looked at her and she gave a little cry of pain for what she saw in his eyes.

'We'll make our home as lovely as we can. I'll try not to be just a no-account wife for you. I'll try not to be just a splutter-heels . . .'

Dock lay down with his face in her lap, his arms around her, and out over the hills of Antelope Opal looked with wet eyes at the long gray road leading valleyward. It was a road to forget, for she had closed the door to her dreams. She ran her fingers through his thin hair and slipped a hand under his shirt; and at her touch she felt his arms tighten around her waist. In the west the sun sank golden through the valley's purple and shot a spectrum of flame up the sky. To the north was a cloud-castle with lilac flame along its spires and with orange fire smouldering in its towers. Twilight came and deepened and the mountains drew around them cloaks of blue shadows and the hills of Antelope became misty with golden haze. And little by little the gray road blurred and vanished.

Dock stirred and sat up and Opal drew his head over and kissed him. 'We'll build our home here,' she said.

For a few moments they stood together, looking over the hills, at the depths of blue on the northern

mountains, at the rolling fields of golden wheat growing fainter and fainter in the gloom. And then hand in hand they went back down the hill to their house.

THE END

Vardis Fisher was born in Idaho in 1895, and is a graduate of the University of Utah, and secured his Master's Degree from the University of Chicago.

He is, in the opinion of his Western publishers, one of the really significant writers of our day and age.

The author of many previous novels, he is at present engaged in a great series, taking man from the man-like animal, down to the present time, which is meeting with wide acclaim. The first two volumes of the series, *Darkness and the Deep*, and *The Golden Rooms*, have been published and copy for the third volume is now in the hands of Mr. Fisher's Eastern publishers.

At one time Director of the Federal Writers' Project, he is now located at Hagerman, Idaho, devoting himself to literary work, including educational work and a popular newspaper column.

We feel that Vardis Fisher is an author whose influence on American letters is likely to be as great as that of Theodore Dreiser or Ernest Hemingway and that on the strength of the novels thus far published, he may well lay acclaim to greatness.

THE COMPLETE WORKS OF VARDIS FISHER

Title	Price
Sonnets to an Imaginary Madonna (Out of Print)	
Hard to get, but a copy can be located now and then by advertising.	
Toilers of the Hills	\$2.50
This is the third printing only. Copies of the first printing turn up now and then, and we can sell for \$5.00 up per copy when available.	
Dark Bridwell	2.50
In Tragic Life, Trade Edition (Out of Print)	
In Tragic Life, DeLuxe Edition (Out of Print)	
DeLuxe edition very expensive. No copies on the market as far as we know. The collector who must have one will probably have to pay \$25.00.	
Passions Spin the Plot, Trade Edition	2.50
Passions Spin the Plot, DeLuxe Edition (Out of Print)	
We Are Betrayed, Trade Edition	2.50
We Are Betrayed, DeLuxe Edition (Out of Print)	
No Villain Need Be, Trade Edition	2.50
No Villain Need Be, DeLuxe Edition	7.50
April, Trade Edition	2.00
April, DeLuxe Edition	7.00
Forgive Us Our Virtues, Trade Edition	2.50
Forgive Us Our Virtues, DeLuxe Edition	7.50
†The Neurotic Nightingale (Out of Print)	
†Odyssey of a Hero (Out of Print)	
†Challenge to Evasion, by Vardis Fisher and David Rein	3.00
Children of God, DeLuxe Edition (Out of Print)	
The DeLuxe Edition of <i>Children of God</i> is the only Caxton Edition of this book. The Trade edition is published exclusively by Harper & Brothers.	
The DeLuxe edition is limited to 100 signed and numbered copies.	
It, like all other DeLuxe Editions, is bound in full green library morocco, gilt tops, title page of Imperial Japanese Vellum.	
City of Illusion, Popular Caxton Edition (Out of Print)	
Limited edition of one thousand copies, unnumbered.	
City of Illusion, DeLuxe Edition (Out of Print)	
<i>City of Illusion</i> is published jointly by The Caxton Printers, Ltd., and Harper & Brothers. The DeLuxe Caxton Edition is limited to one hundred signed and numbered copies. Bound in full green library morocco, gilt tops, title page of Imperial Japanese Vellum.	
Darkness and the Deep, DeLuxe Edition	8.00
The Golden Rooms, DeLuxe Edition	9.00
The Mothers, DeLuxe Edition	9.00
†The Caxton Printers in Idaho—edition limited to 450 copies, bound in boards	2.50
We will attempt to secure, through advertising, copies of out-of-print items for collectors who ask us to do so. Prices are not high, although Fisher is rapidly becoming one of the authors whom collectors favor.	

† Not published by CAXTON.



The CAXTON PRINTERS, Ltd.
Caldwell, Idaho